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National in Form, Putinist in Content: Minority Institutions ‘Outside Politics’

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, Russia has developed a set of institutions for the management of ethno-linguistic diversity based on the principle of ‘national cultural autonomy’. This article examines the positioning of these institutions within Russian society, arguing that while state-endorsed discourses locate them within the culture sphere—treated as distinct from political processes—there is in fact an interpenetration of ‘politics’ and ‘culture’. The article identifies why these institutions position themselves within the ‘cultural sphere’ while also supporting the country’s meta-narratives on inter-ethnic tolerance and, effectively, the political *status quo*. Soviet legacies of inter-ethnic relations continue to be socially embedded, yet within this framework some dissenting voices are also discerned.

THIS ARTICLE ANALYSES THE POSITIONING WITHIN RUSSIAN SOCIETY of institutions for the management of ethno-linguistic and cultural diversity that are based on ‘national cultural autonomy’. It is argued that, while state-endorsed discourses ostensibly locate these institutions within the cultural sphere—treated as distinct from political processes—in fact there is an interpenetration of ‘politics’ and ‘culture’. Ethnic institutions, whether directly or indirectly, are called upon to support meta-narratives on the country’s unity and inter-ethnic tolerance, as well as, effectively, the political *status quo*. Therein lies a paradox: on the one hand, Russia has sought to place ethnic policies in the cultural sphere, situating minority representative institutions outside overt political processes and linking their activities to general notions of ‘cultural development’. On the other hand, these institutions are an integral part of the country’s socio-political order: through them, ethnic communities cultivate narratives of belonging and nurture a collective identity, yet they are compelled to conform to prevailing

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societal discourses. Potential deviation from existing rules of engagement can be denounced as crossing the invisible boundary between ‘culture’ and ‘political activity’, with both concepts interpreted broadly and flexibly. As such, ethnic institutions must be understood in the context of the Russian leadership’s centralised political system. Meanwhile, the Soviet folkloristic, ethnographic approach to inter-ethnic relations continues, revealing the enduring relevance of Soviet legacies.

The article is divided into three parts. First, it briefly outlines diversity management and ethnic institutions in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, and the significance of drawing a demarcation line between cultural and political spheres of activity in the management of ethnic diversity. Second, using qualitative data from interviews in Russia, I examine the perceptions of (the majority of) respondents from ethnic institutions of being ‘outside politics’, and the practical significance of this approach. Third, I highlight the factors that are likely to prompt persons belonging to ethnic minorities to adjust to dominant narratives by positioning themselves within a ‘culture-only’ framework, as well as explaining the presence of (scarce) dissenting voices.

In this article I focus on ethnic institutions that are not based on territoriality (that is, that do not stem from Russia’s ethno-federalism): national cultural autonomies (NCAs) and peoples’ congresses. I use the expression ‘non-territorial autonomy’ (NTA) as an umbrella term to designate mechanisms that encompass both NCAs and peoples’ congresses.¹ I also take into account how ‘regular’ NGOs promoting minority cultures and communities—which have not registered as NCAs or peoples’ congresses—position themselves alongside, and interact with, NTA institutions.

I use data from semi-structured interviews carried out in six cities of the Russian Federation (four of which are in ethnic republics): Moscow, St Petersburg, Saransk (Republic of Mordovia), Kazan (Tatarstan), Petrozavodsk (Karelia) and Ufa (Bashkortostan). The interviews were held during four periods of fieldwork between June 2015 and June 2016.² In total 76 persons were interviewed,³ 55 men and 22 women. The respondents were mostly from civil society—national cultural autonomies (30), peoples’ congresses (13), minority NGOs (22). Others were academics (specialists in inter-ethnic relations in Russia) (21), public officials (four) or former public officials (five);⁴ one person was from a cultural centre (a ‘house of nationalities’).⁵ Some respondents fell into more than one category. The respondents included persons of Tatar (24), Mordovian (eight), Jewish (five), Ukrainian (five) and German (three) ethnic background.⁶ In addition: seven respondents originated from one of the Central Asian

¹NTA institutions can be contrasted with territorial autonomy, with reference to the ethnicity-based constitutional units of the Russian Federation (in particular, the ethnic republics). To designate NTA (and other ethnicity-based) institutions I also use the expressions ‘ethnic institutions’ and ‘minority institutions’.

²15–26 June 2015 (Saransk, Kazan); 21–30 October 2015 (Moscow, St Petersburg); 21–29 April (Petrozavodsk, Moscow, St Petersburg); 16–30 May 2016 (Ufa, Kazan, Moscow).

³Of these, 21 respondents were interviewed in Kazan, 17 in Moscow, 12 in Ufa, 11 in St Petersburg, eight in Saransk and seven in Petrozavodsk.

⁴The term ‘public official’ designates a civil servant or a representative in an elected body.

⁵Several other respondents had offices in (and were thereby affiliated to) houses of nationalities.

⁶In this article I use the expression ‘nationality’ interchangeably with ‘ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic group’. The Russian *natsional’nost’* is close to the meaning of ‘ethnicity’ (Shahin 1989). I also treat all ethnic groups in Russia, with the exception of the Russian majority, as national minorities, in line with the usage of the expression in international law. See for example the Council of Europe’s 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), and the Opinions of the Advisory Committee on the FCNM. The FCNM was ratified by Russia in 1998.

countries; eight had a Finno-Ugric ethnic background (other than Mordovian), of whom two were Karelians; ten were ethnic Russians or did not identify with a particular ethnic group; six belonged to other ethnic groups.⁷

Politics and culture: incompatible opposites?

The separation between ethnic institutions' political and cultural spheres of activity in diversity management mirrors the distinction between political and cultural forms of self-determination and nation-building. In the study of the nation and nationalism, the modernist paradigm has emphasised the political nature of nations, conceived as 'territorial political communities'. Some authors have stressed the primacy of the political over the cultural nation; for example, Breuilly (1993) argues that the latter realises itself through the former, the nation being situated within a political context;⁸ Deutsch (1966) and Tilly (1975) stress that a modern state needs a political community, and an identity based on it, in order to be viable; others have seen cultural ties as phenomena that shape the nation-state's political community (Giddens 1985), yet without acknowledging how nationalism 'defines and infuses with passion' national identities (Smith 1998, p. 75). Inversely, other authors have stressed the strength of cultural nationalism (Hutchinson 1987, 1994, 1999; Gans 2003). Extreme, diametrically opposed approaches to nationalism tend to be uncommon: thus, for example, Smith (1998) has argued against the reductionist portrayal of a nation as an exclusively political community. Similarly, this article subscribes to the view that the cultural dimension of a nation does not manifest itself in a vacuum and cannot insulate itself from political institutions and processes.

The cultural/political divide with reference to inter-ethnic relations within a state was also at the heart of the theory of 'national cultural autonomy', developed in the late nineteenth century by Austro-Marxists Karl Renner (2005) and Otto Bauer (2000). With the Austro-Hungarian empire in mind, the Austro-Marxists posited that the relationship between nations and states had to be reconceptualised in order to accommodate the former through cultural autonomy. In Renner's view, the nation had to be disassociated from territory, with a shift from the territorial principle to the personality principle: this would enable individuals to enjoy cultural autonomy and be part of a nation, regardless of place of residence or territorial boundaries (Renner 2005). He further envisaged nations as autonomously determining their own cultural policies within the overarching political entity of the state: this implied a division between cultural matters (issues concerning the nation itself, and managed by it) and political issues ('common affairs' for all nations, managed by the state) (Renner 2005, p. 24). Indeed, Renner argued, the national question could only be resolved by focusing on the nations themselves, and freeing them from 'political constellations, from the necessity of political barter, from feudal and clerical influences' (Renner 2005, p. 31).

Lenin's views diverged from the Austro-Marxists' approach: while the latter implicitly treated cultural self-determination as sufficient to satisfy the needs of nations, Lenin considered political self-determination to be superior to its cultural counterpart: the highest form of freedom was to be found in the right to secession, particularly as an expression of an 'oppressed-nation' form of nationalism.⁹ Questions as to modalities of diversity management—and as to

⁷Two Azerbaijanis, one Armenian, one Kumyk, one Chechen, one Lithuanian.

⁸Even while acknowledging that 'people do yearn for communal membership, do have a strong sense of ... belonging to culturally defined and bounded worlds which give their lives meaning' (Breuilly 1993, p. 401).

⁹In opposition to Great Russian nationalism, Lenin's view was that acknowledging the right to secession would not result in the disintegration of the polity, but rather satisfy a quest for equal rights (Lenin 1972).

whether to place a greater emphasis on political or cultural mechanisms—became prominent after 1905, the result of an upsurge of national movements and the formation of nationality-based political parties (Hirsch 2005, pp. 24–5).¹⁰ Some such parties called for national-territorial (political) autonomy, while others (particularly the Jewish Socialist Party, the Bund) favoured cultural, extraterritorial autonomy (Bottomore & Goode 1978; Pipes 1997, pp. 19, 24, 27–8; Hirsch 2005). Following a short-lived experimentation with national cultural autonomy in Siberia and the Far East¹¹ after the revolution—and before the Bolsheviks' ultimate takeover—the Soviet doctrine opted for the territorialisation of ethnicity in the shape of ethnic federalism.¹² Yet territoriality was not the only mechanism for diversity management: Brubaker (1994, p. 47) highlights the interplay of two different forms of 'institutionalisation of nationhood': the 'territorial and political' (ethnic federalism), and the 'ethnocultural and personal' (a person's ethnicity, as recorded in passports, regardless of place of residence). The 'ethnocultural and personal' form of nationhood presented some similarities to the Austro-Marxists' personality principle.¹³ And, despite the initial emphasis on territorial-political self-determination, education and cultural development became vital elements of the Soviet strategy in the management of ethnic diversity.

The principal reason for the attention to 'cultural development' of peoples was practical: the Soviet government needed specialised workers and managers for the efficient running of the country. In 1917 Russia had still not produced an industrial proletariat that could promote the principles underpinning the revolution, as most of Tsarist Russia's population had resided in rural, underdeveloped regions. Moreover, different ethno-linguistic groups were at varying levels of social, economic and political development, so that the success of the Soviet project was linked to less developed groups overcoming their backward conditions by undergoing a 'cultural revolution'.¹⁴ Thus, 'cultural development' became intertwined with modernisation and the advancement of revolutionary (Soviet) principles.¹⁵ As part of the population's development, considerable efforts were made towards the standardisation and promotion of minority languages and cultures (Lewis 1972; Anderson & Silver 1984; Kirkwood 1989; Martin 2001; Grenoble 2003; Pavlenko 2008), as well as the incorporation of ethnic cadres into the Soviet administration (*korenizatsiya*). An interpenetration of culture and politico-ideological aims soon emerged, with the Soviet regime making use of 'cultural technologies' (Hirsch 2005, p. 13) to propagate particular views, turning culture into an 'ideological tool' (Adams 1998, p. 96).¹⁶ Thus, ethnographic museums served to promote the narrative of the Soviet Union's transformation (and the development of its peoples) under the guidance of the CPSU (Hirsch 2005, pp. 188–89), with propaganda aimed to

¹⁰Some ultimately attained representation in the *Duma*; others were active in exile (Pipes 1997; Hirsch 2005, p. 25).

¹¹In Siberia (1917–1920, particularly the National Cultural Autonomy of Muslims of Inner Russia and Siberia), and the Far East Republic (1920–1922). See Barbieri (2011), Nam (1998, 1999).

¹²The Bolsheviks opposed extraterritorial autonomy as liable to divide the proletariat along ethnic lines (Stalin 1950; Pipes 1997, p. 33). The territorialisation of ethnicity is further evidenced by Stalin's definition of a 'nation', as a 'historically evolved, stable community based on a common language, *territory*, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture' (Stalin 1950, p. 239; emphasis added).

¹³Although the Bolsheviks clearly had very different priorities, linked to the creation of a Soviet society.

¹⁴As it became known in the 1930s (Hirsch 2005, p. 262).

¹⁵By rushing the population through the historical stages of the Marxist timeline: from feudalism to capitalism to socialism and, ultimately, to communism.

¹⁶See also Verdery (1991).

alter mass consciousness (Kenez 1985).¹⁷ A number of consequences are relevant to this article. The first is a resulting overlap of cultural and political indoctrination, evident from programmes for ‘political education’ (*politprosvet*).¹⁸ Second, the ethno-linguistic complexity of the Soviet Union created a need for systematising and classifying its peoples, cultures and languages (Tishkov 1997). National markers (such as clothing and artefacts for museums, dance and music) were identified so as to differentiate particular ethnic regions from others and to avoid an excessive homogenisation into a Soviet mould (Hirsch 2005, p. 225). Yet the emphasis on particular national (predominantly folklore-based) markers tended to essentialise groups, over-simplifying their actual complexity. Third, for the evolution towards a socialist society to be presented as successful, ethnographers did not only study cultures but at times became involved in processes of cultural production itself, reworking some cultural forms subsequently presented as original (Hirsch 2005, pp. 267–69). It led to a state control of culture, to the detriment of spontaneity in cultural expression (Adams 2010).

The support for national languages and cultures was reduced from the 1930s onwards, while the Russian language gained strength as the *de facto* official language of the Soviet Union. Thus, the overarching ‘Soviet culture’ became increasingly homogenising, as well as forming a continuum with (Soviet) politics. And, despite the early references to political self-determination mentioned above, nationalities and ethnicity-based regions were clearly not autonomous political actors: they operated within a rigid socio-political framework supplied by the state, which is aptly captured by the well-known Soviet slogan ‘national in form, socialist in content’ (Stalin 1955). Thus, both culture and political ‘autonomy’ effectively converged in the Soviet idea, and the attributes of ‘differences’ between nationalities were controlled and only permitted superficial expression.

Post-Soviet Russia: the legacy of ‘cultural development’

While ethnicity-based territorial units had not enjoyed real autonomy from the centre in the Soviet period, the national renaissance of the 1990s¹⁹—which had already started under *perestroika*—raised concerns as to the viability of the newly formed Russian Federation. Fears over Russia’s potential dismemberment through multiple claims of territorial autonomy led to the notion of non-territorial cultural autonomy becoming an attractive option.²⁰ The formulation of strategies promoting state cohesion was even more urgent given the political and economic instability of the Yel’tsin years, and the increasing autonomy of the regions,²¹ particularly non-Russian ones.

¹⁷This included repressing forms of ‘backwardness’ and superstition.

¹⁸The expression can also be rendered in English as ‘political enlightenment’.

¹⁹Clearly various developments also occurred between the 1930s and 1991, which cannot be analysed in this article because of space constraints. For changes in the education system during the Soviet period affecting minority languages, with the increasingly central role of the Russian language, see Kreindler (1989), Pavlenko (2008).

²⁰In the summer of 1992 the State Committee for Nationality Affairs developed the ‘Concept of Nationality Policy in the Russian Federation’. Although this document did not ultimately gain official approval, it contains the essence of the shift in nationalities policy, ‘from national-territorial to the national-cultural principle of organisations of social life’ (Osipov 2004, p. 67; emphasis added).

²¹See, for example, Stoner-Weiss (1999), Kirkow (1998). In 1990 and 1991 most of the republics of the RSFSR declared their sovereignty, in a phenomenon known as the ‘parade of sovereignties’.

Russia adopted a Law on National Cultural Autonomy (NCA Law) in 1996.²² The introduction of cultural autonomy implied a partial decoupling of ethnicity and territory.²³ Yet the introduction of NCA also signified a stronger focus on cultural, rather than political, processes in the management of ethnic diversity. Russia distanced itself from the idea of territorial political communities,²⁴ shifting from the ‘territorial and political’ to (a greater emphasis on) the ‘ethnocultural and personal’ form of nationhood, to use Brubaker’s (1994) expressions.

Article 1 of the NCA Law defines NCA as:

[A] form of national and *cultural self-determination* constituting a public association of citizens of the Russian Federation, identifying with a particular ethnic community, finding themselves in a situation of national minority in a particular territory, based on their voluntary chosen identity for the purpose of *independently regulating* the issues of their identity preservation and their linguistic, educational and national cultural development.²⁵ (Emphasis added)

According to this provision, NCAs can autonomously manage matters relating to an ethnic group’s language and culture, including in the area of education. Since 1996, multiple NCAs have been established, forming a hierarchy of vertically integrated institutions at the local, regional and federal levels. The resulting multilayered structure, developed from the bottom up, was to streamline exchanges between ethnic institutions and the authorities. NCAs are not the only NTA institutions present in Russia: ‘peoples’ congresses’ have also operated alongside (and at times jointly with) NCAs.²⁶ Peoples’ congresses are ethnicity-based representative assemblies that first developed in the early twentieth century and re-emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Osipov 2011, p. 4). Resolutions are agreed upon during regular congresses, with the participation of delegates from regional organisations; thus, like NCAs, peoples’ congresses have a pyramidal structure.²⁷ For example, Tatarstan houses the World Congress of Tatars, which brings together Tatar organisations in Russia, and also convenes international events for co-ethnics outside Russia. Peoples’ congresses in the other republics visited during the fieldwork were: the Inter-Regional Public Organisation of Mordovian (Moksha and Erzya) Peoples, the Congress of Karelians and the World Kurultaj (Congress)

²²Federal’nyi zakon 74-FZ, ‘O natsional’no-kul’turnoi avtonomii’, 17 June 1996. By 2016 the law had been amended ten times. The text of the law (in Russian) and amendments are available at: <http://base.garant.ru/135765/>, accessed 17 March 2017. Russia is not the only Eastern European country to have adopted legal provisions on NCA in the post-communist period; other examples include Estonia, Hungary and Serbia.

²³Only ‘partial’ as the Federation’s ethnic republics were preserved. Indeed, titular nationalities were unlikely to renounce territorial arrangements, which would have been seen as a retrogressive step in the promotion of their rights (Oversloot 2007, 2013; Hagendoom *et al.* 2008). Non-territorial cultural autonomy was thus combined with territoriality.

²⁴As per Stalin’s definition of a nation (Stalin 1950, p. 239).

²⁵Federal’nyi zakon 74-FZ, ‘O natsional’no-kul’turnoi avtonomii’, 17 June 1996. By 2016 the law had been amended ten times. The text of the law (in Russian) and amendments are available at: <http://base.garant.ru/135765/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

²⁶In some cases there is a convergence of the two structures, for example with Mordovian NCAs at the local level being part of the network of the Mordovian people’s congress.

²⁷Peoples’ congresses are included in this article given that they present some of the features of non-territorial cultural autonomy: they promote the interests of a particular ethnicity, they have a representative structure (based on internal elections), and they are generally in receipt of public funds. See Osipov (2011, pp. 4–5).

of Bashkirs.²⁸ The main difference between NCAs and peoples' congresses is that NCAs are registered according to a *lex specialis* (the NCA Law) and, by the same law, they must operate outside a particular group's ethnic republic (if it exists); by contrast, peoples' congresses are registered as 'ordinary' public organisations²⁹ and can operate both inside and outside the relevant ethnicity-based territorial formations.

Russia's approach to diversity management is far removed from mechanisms that directly involve national minorities in the political life of the country, such as consociational power-sharing systems.³⁰ The creation of new territorial-political formations granting regional autonomy to ethnic communities residing therein might have led to more tangible options for influencing decision-making at the regional level, and for minority participation in public life. The Russian system also differs from institutional designs that guarantee or facilitate representation of national minorities in parliament, through reserved seats and/or ethnicity-based political parties. Yet even within the cultural sphere, cultural autonomy has ultimately been denuded of many of its attributes, metamorphosing into general rights to 'culture' and 'development' without these being accompanied by specific benefits for minorities or detailed government obligations.³¹ Legislation on 'development' of minority languages and cultures is declarative, and devoid of mechanisms for implementation (Bowring 2013, p. 33; Oeter 2013, p. 43).³² Similarly, Osipov (2013b, p. 67) argues that references to 'cultural and national development'³³ are empty of meaning in practice, despite frequently occurring in public discourse and official documents on inter-ethnic relations. 'Cultural autonomy' does not extend to the autonomous management of cultural and educational matters and institutions (such as minority-language schools). NCAs have primarily (albeit not exclusively) been involved in a range of cultural activities, particularly (inter-)ethnic festivals, seminars and other public events. In this sense the Soviet legacy of strongly associating ethnic institutions with cultural (often folklore-based) activities has been prolonged and continuously revived.

Ethnic institutions 'outside politics'?

In this context NTA institutions appear to be situated 'outside politics'. In order to examine to what extent this proposition corresponds to reality I rely on data from interviews, even though one should, at this point, note a (seemingly inevitable) selection bias with regard to

²⁸The Mordovian and Karelian congresses are also part of a multi-ethnic (and overarching) network of organisations united by ethno-linguistic affinity: the Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples of Russia (AFUN) and, at the international level, the World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples.

²⁹See Art. 21, Federal'nyi zakon 82-FZ, 'Ob obshchestvennykh ob"edineniyakh', 19 May 1995, available at: <http://base.garant.ru/10164186/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

³⁰See, for example, Lijphart (2008) and Taylor (2009).

³¹A significant difference between Renner's NCA model and the Russian post-Soviet model is that in the latter case funding is not readily available for NCA activity. In Renner's model, each nationality would manage its own education system and cultural outputs (literature and art) through resources provided directly by the members of each nationality *via* the payment of taxes (Renner 2005, p. 31). The financial resources of Russia's NCAs are generally very limited.

³²For example, Art. 2(2) of the Law 'On the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation' states: 'The Russian Federation guarantees all its peoples regardless of their numbers equal rights on the conservation and *development* of the native language, freedom of choice and of use of the language for communication' (emphasis added). The law does not refer to mechanisms for implementation. Federal'nyi Zakon 1807-I, 'O yazykakh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii', 25 October 1991, available at: <http://base.garant.ru/10148970/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

³³See for example Art. 71(f) of the 1993 Russian Constitution.

respondents in this study: the tense relations between Russia and the West, and the state's targeting of Russian organisations with links to foreign institutions³⁴ have likely had a negative impact on the decision of potential respondents as to whether to grant interviews, and/or the information they chose to disclose. While a small number of respondents were relatively outspoken (mostly academics, but also a few NGO and NTA representatives), many—particularly those who cooperated more closely with state organs—seemed to choose their wording very carefully, and at times nervously. This was likely exacerbated by the fact that, under Putin, the regional devolution of the Yel'tsin years was counteracted by strong re-centralising moves, statism and the promotion of Russian patriotism (Laruelle 2009a, 2009b; Prina 2016), as well as severe limitations on civil society freedom.³⁵

The first notable point concerning the place of NTA institutions in Russian society is that respondents from these organisations tended to stress in interviews that they operated 'outside politics'.³⁶ They referred to the 'apolitical' nature of their organisations when answering general questions concerning their activities and objectives. At the same time, some of the respondents also held seats in elected bodies (for example, as MPs in their republic's *Duma*). Others were members of public chambers³⁷ at the regional or federal levels. In these cases, stating that they were 'outside politics' might seem disingenuous: they occasionally indicated that these positions provided supplementary opportunities to promote the interests of their ethnic communities, through direct dialogue with public officials, some of whom were particularly high-ranking in regional or federal state organs. However, these respondents did not, overall, explicitly refer to the use of political channels to advance their goals, in the sense that they refrained from direct involvement in politics, such as electoral campaigning or seeking political representation, or indirect political activity, such as lobbying politicians or MPs for legal reform or policy changes, or calling for direct involvement in law-making.

One of the reasons for the underuse of such channels is very prosaic: political parties on the basis of ethnicity are banned in Russia.³⁸ Persons belonging to ethnic minorities have entered politics—if they have chosen and managed to do so—as members of mainstream parties, particularly the party of power, United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*—UR) (Chaisty 2013). For example, in September 2016 the Republic of Tatarstan's *Duma* had 82 MPs from UR out of a total of 95 MPs.³⁹ Numerous governors have similarly joined the ranks of UR (Reuter 2010). Meanwhile, mainstream parties have not included specific issues of relevance

³⁴Through the 'Foreign Agents' Law. See below ('Crimes' and punishment).

³⁵See below ('Crimes' and punishment).

³⁶The recurring expression was *my vne politiki* ('we are outside politics').

³⁷Public chambers are institutions established to facilitate consultation between the state and civil society, at the federal and regional levels. For the federal-level public chamber, see Federal'nyi zakon 32-FZ, 'Ob Obshchestvennoi palate Rossiiskoi Federatsii', 4 April 2005, available at: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_52651/, accessed 17 March 2017.

³⁸The constitutionality of this restriction was confirmed by the Russian Constitutional Court (Judgement No. 18-P, 15 December 2004) on the grounds that ethnic parties could exacerbate ethnic or religious tensions. On the Council of Europe's criticism of the ban, see Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC), (*Third Opinion on the Russian Federation*, ACFC/OP/III(2011)010, 24 November 2011, §26, 136, 140, 206, 267, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008c6a6>, accessed 17 March 2017.

³⁹The other MPs were affiliated to 'Tatarstan—New Age' (ten MPs) and the Communist Party (three). See the website of the government of Tatarstan, available at: <http://gossob.tatarstan.ru/frakcii/>, accessed 7 September 2016.

to minority groups in their political platforms in order to attract ethnic votes (Moser 2000, p. 83).⁴⁰ And, as Giuliano and Gorenburg (2012) point out, ethnicity only played a role in Russian politics during a brief period of ethnic revival in the 1990s, after which it faded.⁴¹ Before highlighting factors for NTA institutions' underuse of political processes to promote ethnicity-related interests, we need to account for the respondents' perceptions of 'politics'.

What kind of 'politics'?

'Politics', 'political processes' and 'political activity' are clearly multifaceted expressions, open to multiple interpretations. As for other policy areas, the Russian leadership might have chosen to leave them 'purposefully ambiguous'.⁴² The concept of 'political activity' can stretch to encompass various acts, which may or may not be directly in opposition to the Russian government but still be regarded as deviating from existing rules of engagement and, as such, contained, as shown below. Similarly, various perceptions of 'politics' were detected among the respondents. For example, the head of a regional German NCA noted that remaining outside politics was not a realistic option for Russian Germans, in light of the history of their deportation from the Volga region.⁴³ In his opinion, the Russian Germans had had no choice but to confront this particular political issue.⁴⁴ At the same time, another leader of the same NCA structure (in a higher-ranking position), while also referring to the Russian Germans' painful past, did not consider it an issue of a political nature.⁴⁵ Besides the specificity of the Russian Germans' case, divergent perceptions of politics can be partially attributed to the fact that the word *politika* in Russian can be translated as either 'politics' or 'policy' (as in *natsional'naya politika*—ethnic politics/policies). One of the interview questions was whether NTA institutions could impact upon Russia's *natsional'naya politika*. Some respondents evidently interpreted the question as to whether their activities related to political processes and institutions. In this case, the respondents almost invariably replied that involvement in activities perceived as 'political' or decision-making on broadly defined political issues were outside the remit of public organisations. Often there was no expectation that ethnic institutions would become involved in decision-making: for example, a representative of the Moscow branch of the Mordovian people's congress—the Inter-Regional Public Organisation of Mordovian (Moksha and Erzya) Peoples (hereinafter 'Mordovian people's congress')—said that it was not for an organisation such as his to take decisions on documents such as the 'Strategy of State Nationality Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025': this was for the experts and the politicians, while his institution's role was to promote Mordovian culture.⁴⁶

⁴⁰See also Moser (2013).

⁴¹It has also been argued that ethnicity has played a role in Russian electoral politics, as United Russia has relied on the support of ethnic regions, including (but not only—White 2016) through electoral manipulation (Goodnow *et al.* 2014), although results have been influenced by regional contextual characteristics (White 2015).

⁴²The expression is Shevel's (2011), with reference to 'compatriots' in Russian legislation.

⁴³Ethnic Germans who migrated to Russia in the eighteenth century and settled in the Volga region were treated as Nazi collaborators during World War II. The Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which had been established in 1924, was abolished in 1941 and ethnic Germans deported to Siberia and Central Asia.

⁴⁴Interview 1.1, with a German NCA representative, Kazan, 21 May 2016 (see the Appendix for the list of cited respondents).

⁴⁵Interview 1.2, with a German NCA representative, Moscow, 27 May 2016.

⁴⁶Interview 2.1, with a Mordovian people's congress representative, Moscow, 20 October 2015.

These respondents did not refer to a possible nexus between the promotion of a minority culture and the formulation of policies conducive to it through an inclusive process. Other respondents interpreted the same question on impact on ethnic policies as inquiring over possible cooperation between ethnic institutions and the authorities in formulating (federal or regional) inter-ethnic policies or strategies. In this case, the respondents generally referred to opportunities for dialogue with state organs.⁴⁷

Overall, NTA activities have tended to revolve around the preservation of non-Russian cultures and languages.⁴⁸ In line with this, when asked about possible problems faced by their communities, most respondents referred to ongoing processes leading to the loss of their cultures and languages, which called for countervailing measures. Similarly, when asked about their motivation for establishing NTA institutions, they primarily talked about the promotion of their languages and cultures.⁴⁹ In describing cooperation with governmental institutions, the respondents principally mentioned participation in cultural and educational events.

At the same time, there were additional dimensions to the activity of NTA institutions. And, to be sure, some differences are to be attributed to varying circumstances relating to individuals and their organisations: even in the relatively small sample of persons interviewed, there were substantial variations in factors such as profession, age, levels of education of persons involved with NTA institutions, as well as their motivation for civic engagement. Some respondents referred to activities that were not strictly culture-related, such as monitoring the implementation of relevant law and policy. One such example was provided in Mordovia, with reference to the implementation of the obligation to teach the two Mordovian languages (Moksha and Erzya) in schools.⁵⁰ The respondent, a representative of the Mordovian people's congress, argued that public officials, given their limited time and resources, could not assess the impact and possible shortcomings of multilingual education: in these cases, civil society organisations provide the relevant data, which could be employed to rectify possible deficiencies, through mutually beneficial cooperation.⁵¹ Others referred to activities resulting in tangible outputs, such as textbooks for language education.⁵² Moreover, some NCAs provided a support network to co-ethnics, particularly immigrants recently arrived in Russia,⁵³ or carried out other social and humanitarian functions to help their communities.⁵⁴ According

⁴⁷Although there were some exceptions, described below ('Crimes' and punishment; The implications of remaining 'outside politics').

⁴⁸See these organisations' aims, as outlined in their statutes; for example, the website of the Mordovian people's congress (available at: <http://mordvarf.com/>, accessed 7 September 2016), and the Resolution from the 6th Congress (available at: <http://mordvarf.com/rezoljucija-vi-sjezda/>, accessed 7 September 2016).

⁴⁹The other motivating factor frequently cited by respondents was what they perceived to be the 'higher status' that NCAs possess in the eyes of the authorities, compared to other civil society organisations.

⁵⁰This is also mentioned in the Resolution of the 6th Congress (with reference to the Republic of Mordovia and areas—outside the republic—densely populated by Mordovians) (see above on the Resolution).

⁵¹Interview 2.2, with a Mordovian people's congress representative, Saransk, 18 June 2015.

⁵²Interview 1.4, with representatives of a Tatar NCA, Kazan, 24 June 2015; interview 1.12, with a Finnish NCA, St Petersburg, 26 October 2015.

⁵³Interviews with representatives of the following: 1.3, an Azerbaijani NCA, Moscow, 23 October 2015; 1.5, an Azerbaijani NCA, St Petersburg, 28 October 2015; 1.6, an Armenian NCA, Kazan, 20 May 2016; 1.7, a Tajik NCA, Kazan, 18 May 2016; and 1.8, an Uzbek NCA, Kazan, 17 May 2016.

⁵⁴Interview 1.9, with a Jewish NCA, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016; interview 1.10, with a Lithuanian NCA, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016. The NTA institutions referred to here are only part of the constellation of the civil society institutions that are active in the promotion of minority rights, languages and cultures; according to an academic interviewed, some NGOs might be more effective than NTA institutions in providing practical assistance to persons belonging to minorities—for example, in the case of assistance to migrants. Interview 4.3, with an academic specialising in inter-ethnic relations in Russia, Moscow, 22 October 2015.

to an observer (an academic in St Petersburg),⁵⁵ they further provided something akin to a clan structure, in the case of groups relying on such social networks. At times NTA institutions found themselves mediating between co-ethnics and Russian officials, contributing to the pre-emption of inter-ethnic tensions. For example, the leader of the local NCA related two instances in which persons belonging to her ethnic group had been apprehended by the police for irregularities: in both cases she had received phone calls from the police and was asked to make herself available to discuss, and find a solution, to the problem with all parties involved.⁵⁶ Similarly, other respondents referred to occasions in which they were summoned to ‘resolve’ a problem that involved ethnic minorities, so as to defuse existing or potential inter-ethnic tensions.⁵⁷

Another activity mentioned by some respondents was participation in devising documents on nationalities policy. For example, one respondent said that the Mordovian people’s congress had submitted recommendations to a draft of the ‘Strategy of State Nationality Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025’. In his opinion, these had been taken into account by the Russian government.⁵⁸ Another respondent talked about opportunities to contribute to strategy documents on immigration.⁵⁹ NTA institutions have also made reference in their resolutions to involvement in the formulation of law and policy, as well as their execution. For example, the resolution from the 6th congress of the Mordovian people includes as objectives: ‘to introduce in the regions the practice of preliminary discussions of draft legislation ... concerning inter-ethnic relations, in cooperation with representatives of national public organisations’; and ‘to appeal to the state organs of the subjects of the Russian Federation, in regions where Mordovians live compactly, with the request to guarantee the adequate representation of Mordovians in elected organs and their representatives’ participation in the work of the executive organs at various levels, and in the activities of the public chamber’.⁶⁰

In practice the activities of NCAs and peoples’ congresses have mostly been inward-looking: their organisational events have been primarily geared to preparing resolutions on their proposed aims and programmes of activity, while they do not seem to influence or inform public policy on Russia’s multi-ethnicity. In line with this, a leader of the Tatar regional NCA of Bashkortostan (also an MP) stated that, in the republic’s *Duma*, Tatar representatives did not raise issues specifically relating to their ethnic community, but to the entire population of Bashkortostan, implying that the republic’s parliament was ethnicity-blind.⁶¹ This position indicates an avoidance of the articulation of possible group interests, as well as a lack of civic activism beyond mainstream (political) processes. Thus, despite some variation in perceptions and type of activities—for some exclusively focusing on culture, for others partially involving policy (with some consultation and opportunity to influence policy-making) and/or ‘humanitarian’ (neither cultural, nor political) functions—overall, the respondents for the most part located NTA institutions outside political processes.

⁵⁵Interview 4.1, with an academic, St Petersburg, 30 October 2015.

⁵⁶Interview 1.10, with a Lithuanian NCA representative, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016.

⁵⁷Interview 1.7, with a Tajik NCA representative, Kazan, 18 May 2016; interview 1.8, with an Uzbek NCA representative, Kazan, 17 May 2016.

⁵⁸Interview 2.3, with a Mordovian people’s congress representative, Saransk, 19 June 2015. Another Mordovian respondent considered this beyond the remit of the Mordovian people’s congress. Interview 2.1, with a Mordovian people’s congress representative, Moscow, 20 October 2015 (see above, same section).

⁵⁹Interview 1.3, with an Azerbaijani NCA representative, Moscow, 23 October 2015. However, these documents tend to be general. See below (The limitations of formal processes and systems).

⁶⁰On public chambers, see above.

⁶¹Interview 1.11, with a Tatar NCA representative, Ufa, 23 May 2016.

Why remain 'outside politics'?

What the respondents really think is not accessible to the researcher: their statements as to their preference to steer away from politics might simply relate to the public persona they wish to project. Yet, for those who have chosen to embrace the system, what could account for the choice of an 'apolitical', culture-only approach?

The importance of culture: identity and recognition

Most respondents pointed to a close nexus between ethnicity and identity: they considered the preservation and celebration of one's culture and resisting the danger of forgetting one's origins to be crucial to one's identity and personal fulfilment. An anecdote provides useful insight: when chatting to a respondent before an interview I mentioned that the language of the region where I grew up was disappearing, but that I was not active in promoting its preservation, while I researched issues linked to minority cultures and languages in Russia. He described my condition as that of a 'shoemaker without shoes':⁶² the respondent found incomprehensible my decision to place academic curiosity before my own identity. His approach also pointed to an appreciation of culture *per se*, in its 'pure' forms, devoid of a political dimension. In line with this, an NCA leader stated that the pursuit of political interests was incompatible with the role of leader of an ethnic community: political ambitions could interfere with the promotion of minority cultures, which would become instrumentalised as political capital.⁶³

A second reason for the predilection of a 'culture-only' framework seems to derive from cognitive frames constructed around dominant narratives stemming from Soviet legacies. Festivals have been the main instruments to channel and express ethnic identity, and such practices remain deeply entrenched. Similarly, in her analysis of cultural production in Uzbekistan, Adams (1998, 2010) refers to Soviet 'cultural schemas', arguing that they continue to influence cultural production in post-Soviet societies.⁶⁴ In line with this interpretation, NTA organisations' activities have often focused on cultural production (particularly through ethnic festivals). This tends to take place, as in the Soviet period, through the standardisation and classification of cultures, with events divided into 'slots' for different ethnic groups (Adams 1998, p. 99; 2010). Meanwhile, the Russian government, through a centralised education system and media, maintains a monopoly on meanings of cultural production and symbols,⁶⁵ for both majority and minority identities, and how these interact with each other: the diversity of ethnic groups is located within the unifying framework of Russian patriotism.⁶⁶ In this context, the Russian government continues to promote an idealised discourse around the Soviet narrative of friendship of peoples (*druzha narodov*) and inter-ethnic accord, which coexists with Russia's multi-ethnicity.⁶⁷

⁶²He used the expression *sapozhnik bez sapog*.

⁶³Interview 1.2, with a German NCA representative, Moscow, 27 May 2016.

⁶⁴Adams draws on DiMaggio (1997) and Sewell (1992)'s work, interpreting schemas as 'both representation of knowledge and information processing mechanisms ... which are applied in the enactment and reproduction of social life' (Adams 1998, p. 94). She analyses schemas with reference to the way people think about and produce culture.

⁶⁵See also Prina (2016, pp. 95–153). On the promotion of these narratives in the media, see Hutchings and Tolz (2015).

⁶⁶On Russian patriotism, see Laruelle (2009a, p. 5) and Daucé *et al.* (2010). For an account of recent developments in Russian nationalism, see Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2016).

⁶⁷Concepts linked to inter-ethnic tolerance were referred to by many respondents, who stressed the importance of inter-ethnic festivals.

In steering away from political processes and valuing culture as a vehicle to express and assert their identity, some respondents displayed what seemed to be a genuine lack of interest in politics or even policy-making. This reflected the perception of cultural autonomy institutions primarily as cultural centres,⁶⁸ and is close to Soviet forms of expression of ethnic identity through culture. For example, the leader of a Ukrainian NCA in an ethnic republic stated that her motivation for establishing the organisation was a strong emotional attachment to Ukraine and Ukrainian culture: the NCA was a way of retaining a connection with her country of origin, celebrating it through festivals and music.⁶⁹ Like other respondents, she did not convey a particular interest in dialogue with the authorities. Others noted that their priority was the inter-generational transmission of their language:⁷⁰ in these cases engagement with the authorities and heading an NCA was not seen as leading to significant benefits, but rather to dissipating already scarce resources, particularly given the administrative responsibilities arising from the management of an NCA.⁷¹

The leader of a minority NGO referred to other dimensions of cultural activities: he believed that festivals and traditional songs had a deep emotional value for members of his community. This was particularly so, he believed, for the elderly, who, in the case of his ethnic group, had had limited freedom to express their identity in this fashion during the Soviet period.⁷² His organisation did not wish to disappoint their members by failing to represent the community at inter-ethnic festivals, which would deprive them of an outlet for the expression of their cultural distinctiveness, through various manifestations of group identity (music and dancing with a folk ensemble, souvenirs and handicrafts, traditional food). Yet the respondent also referred to the practical difficulties of these types of cultural activities: the need to organise the transport of members of ensembles and musical instruments to the festival area, despite already overstretched resources, as well as an ‘obligation ... to smile for the cameras’. In this context, he indicated that, overall, he found these events superficial and overly rigid, confined to repetitive and standardised forms of expression.⁷³ His opinion was rare; the majority of respondents expressed acquiescence and/or consensus with reference to existing practices.

Consensus might result from the already mentioned predominance of Soviet legacies and continuity through a form of ‘institutional inertia’ (Adams 1998, p. 101). In line with the approach of new institutionalists, this form of behaviour might reproduce itself because ‘individuals often cannot even conceive of appropriate alternatives (or because they regard as unrealistic the alternatives they can imagine)’ (Powell & DiMaggio 1991, p. 11). It has also been suggested that such acquiescence might make persons belonging to minorities effectively complicit in perpetuating a condition of ‘falsehood’. Osipov (2010, 2012) describes Russia’s law and policy on minority rights as symbolic rather than instrumental,⁷⁴ while also linking participants in these processes as effectively endorsing ‘the disciplinary techniques embedded

⁶⁸This view is much removed from the original idea of cultural autonomy conceived by the Austro-Marxists (of which the respondents seemed generally unaware).

⁶⁹Interview 1.15, with a Ukrainian NCA representative, Saransk, 17 June 2015.

⁷⁰Interview 1.12, with a Finnish NCA representative in St Petersburg, 26 October 2015; interview 3.4, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 28 October 2015.

⁷¹Interview 1.12, with a Finnish NCA representative in St Petersburg, 26 October 2015; interview 3.4, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 28 October 2015.

⁷²Interview 3.5, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015.

⁷³Interview 3.5, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015.

⁷⁴Similarly, Zamyatin (2014) argues that laws declaring titular languages of republics as co-official alongside Russian were never intended to be fully implemented, but rather to fulfil a symbolic function (Zamyatin 2014).

in society', resulting in diversity management resting on 'a silent agreement between the government and the citizenry' (Osipov 2013a, p. 79).⁷⁵ This would imply a scenario in which a genuinely pluralistic society is not the aim of diversity management, but rather an illusion of it. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has linked the prevalence of ethnic festivals to the 'folklorisation' of minorities replacing their linguistic and cultural rights. This could bring the risk of minorities being 'relegated to the realm of statistics and colourful folklore',⁷⁶ resulting in the expression of a superficial form of ethnic essentialism while also marginalising more vital minority concerns. Similarly, the Council of Europe referred to a 'narrow' interpretation of 'culture' in the implementation of the NCA Law, which 'discourages the engagement of national-cultural autonomies with other relevant issues related to minority identity'.⁷⁷

At the same time, symbolic policies can have a highly significant function in providing a form of self-validation through recognition, akin to that described by Taylor (1992). Russia's ethnic institutions are afforded attention at a very high level; for example, in 2008 then president Dmitry Medvedev participated in the fifth World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples; in 2013 Putin attended an event celebrating 225 years of the Central Spiritual Administration of Russia's Muslims.⁷⁸ Many respondents from NTA institutions appeared to value such recognition highly; even those who saw the limitations of Russia's minority policies were appreciative of the fact that local and regional authorities treated minority institutions with 'respect'⁷⁹—another form of recognition. Moreover, the complex, multilayered structures of peoples' congresses and large (particularly federal) NCAs give them an aura of officialdom and social importance. This recognition is even more valued in light of the widespread perception of the close nexus between ethnicity and identity already mentioned, and of cultural events *per se* being treated as invested with social significance.

It is in the context of the importance attached to culture and its (symbolic or practical) recognition that one can also situate the two main types of NTA institutions (NCAs and peoples' congresses), with their complex networks of organisations. The proliferation of organisations promoting minority cultures was generally not considered problematic by the respondents: it was not underpinned by different ideological (or political) positions, but rather the said organisations were united by a shared overarching objective: cultural survival in a sea of Russianness, where minority languages and customs are increasingly being assimilated into the dominant Russian culture (Prina 2016). Any action that could publicise and promote a minority culture would contribute to its survival by adding to the efforts of individual organisations. At the same time, such convergence was made possible by the nature of the organisations' activities: the promotion of cultures in a general sense (as

⁷⁵See also Adams (2010, pp. 187–92).

⁷⁶'Situation of Finno-Ugric and Samoyed Peoples', Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Doc.11087, 26 October 2006, available at: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=11601&lang=EN>, accessed 8 November 2016.

⁷⁷'(Third) Opinion on the Russian Federation', Council of Europe ACFC, ACFC/OP/III(2011)010, 24 November 2011, §20; see also §26, 74, 136, 211, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008c6a6>, accessed March 2017.

⁷⁸See, 'Medvedev s glavami Finlandii, Vengrii i Estonia otkroet kongress', *RIA Novosti*, 26 June 2008, available at: <https://ria.ru/politics/20080628/112448151.html>, accessed 8 November 2016; 'Putin: Islam yavlyaetsya yarkim elementom Rossiiskogo kul'turnogo koda', *RIA Novosti*, 22 October 2013, available at: <https://ria.ru/society/20131022/971874406.html>, accessed 8 November 2016.

⁷⁹Interview 1.9, with a Jewish NCA representative, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016.

‘cultural development’) rather than their work being driven by strategic choices that could foreseeably result in targeted policy changes.⁸⁰

Cooperation and networks: some benefits

There is also a cluster of pragmatic reasons for remaining ‘outside politics’. Some respondents indicated that they regarded involvement in politics as counterproductive, as well as a (perhaps) ‘unbecoming’⁸¹ option, which would lead to endless political disputes, complicating the relations between the authorities and civil society. It echoes Renner’s view (2005, p. 31) that nations should be freed from ‘political barter’. It is also in line with Putin’s efforts to create what we may call a ‘post-politics’ *milieu*, by replacing political actors with managers and bureaucrats (Filippov 2004). The latter operate at a level that is above what may be regarded as petty political battles, while also aligning themselves with the political majority and employing channels that are akin to ‘gentlemen’s agreements’.⁸²

It is a form of personalised politics, by which personalities—and informal practices and networks, rather than institutions and systems—are principally responsible for the outcomes of socio-political processes. This results in a reliance on (neo-)patrimonial links,⁸³ which have allowed individuals and institutions to operate alongside existing (yet unviable) systems: informal practices provide alternatives to unpredictable and unreliable legal, political or financial institutions (Ledeneva 1998, 2006, 2013). In line with this, a respondent (an academic specialising in inter-ethnic relations), referred to immigration policies by noting ‘naturally, if there is not a well-defined state policy, a shadow mechanism appears instead’.⁸⁴

Within this framework, informal practices and networks can similarly assist minority institutions in furthering their cultural rights. To this must be added the benefits of the status conferred upon NCAs and peoples’ congresses compared to ordinary NGOs, cited by various respondents.⁸⁵ Respondents did not generally refer to the practical advantages offered by NTA institutions, such as precedence in accessing funding,⁸⁶ or greater influence in feeding into discussions of consultative bodies. Rather, they referred more to a symbolic status: the ‘recognition’ mentioned above. Institutional affiliation to or leadership of an NCA at the regional or—even more significantly—the federal level, and the resulting status and networks,

⁸⁰Outside this framework there also exist more militant organisations, such as the Tatar Public Centre, that openly disagree with official positions.

⁸¹My expression.

⁸²One of the primary reasons has been a shift in the locus of power from the legislative to the executive organs under Putin (Chaisty 2006; Giuliano & Gorenburg 2012).

⁸³Hughes and Sasse (2002, p. 28) refer to the ‘personalization of the bargaining processes’ in Russian society; see also Osipov (2014).

⁸⁴Interview 4.1, with an academic, St Petersburg, 30 October 2015. The respondent referred to inadequate immigration practices, which gave rise to a tendency to illegality, corruption and a shadow economy in relation to immigration.

⁸⁵Interview 1.10, with a Lithuanian NCA, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016; interview 1.12, with a Finnish NCA, St Petersburg, 26 October 2015; interview 1.16, with a Jewish NCA, Saransk, 16 June 2015.

⁸⁶In practice, the interview data suggest that organisations with good relations with the authorities—and particularly NCAs and peoples’ congresses—tend to have more access to public funds, although funding is scarce, and often supplemented by income from other sources (members of the community and/or sponsors). Funding from foreign sources has been restricted by the ‘Foreign Agents’ Law. See below (‘Crimes’ and punishment).

seem to have been, in some cases, usefully employed for the promotion of minority languages and cultures. In this context, some leaders appeared extremely active and motivated: for example, the head of a federal NCA in Moscow referred to a case in which she had used the status arising from her leadership position (and possibly from high-ranking contacts) to reverse a decision to close minority nurseries used by her community. Her technique, she said, had amounted to phoning the right people and emphatically putting her point across.⁸⁷ Other examples given by the respondents were: the reconsideration of cases of (arbitrary or disputed) detention of persons belonging to national minorities; the use of particular textbooks or publications in schools, at the local or regional level; minor alterations to documents on strategies on inter-ethnic relations, on the basis of stakeholder recommendations. Many such cases seemed to have involved informal mediation of leaders of minority groups with state representatives. In such cases, the status deriving from NTA-related positions has only a tenuous link to systems leading to decision- or policy-making in the cultural sphere, yet some minority leaders can make use of their networks to influence such processes through informal practices, operating at the periphery of political processes. Some ethnic leaders have contacts with high-ranking state officials, including the country's president and prime minister: thus, NTA can provide access to opportunities by creating a fertile ground for cooperation between civil society and the authorities at various levels.

According to the leader of an NCA, registering an organisation as an NCA acts as guarantee for the authorities that it will be 'playing by the rules', making public officials well-disposed towards it.⁸⁸ An observer (head of a research centre) stressed that NCAs did not wish to oppose governmental organs, but rather to optimise opportunities for cooperation.⁸⁹ To enable this, NTA institutions have tended to support government positions: according to the same NCA respondent, minority institutions have been expected to support the slogan '*Krym Nash*' ('Crimea is Ours'), following Russia's 2014 annexations of Crimea.⁹⁰ NTA institutions have engaged in other activities that support the government: for example, respondents indicated that they cultivated contacts with their kin states' embassies, facilitating quasi-diplomatic links, thereby promoting the Russian government's interests in the near abroad.⁹¹ Furthermore, they often referred to the need to identify instances of potential inter-ethnic tensions through early warning—such as in the already mentioned cases of mediation—a desirable objective for both minorities and the majority. Subscribing to the NTA system is likely to create higher levels of trust between the authorities and NTA institutions by bringing to the fore common goals and rules of engagement. In this way, the Russian authorities guide minority institutions towards specific forms of activity and articulation of their demands, to provide greater predictability and standardisation of majority–minority exchanges.

There are other tangible benefits stemming from NTA as a 'culture-only' framework. While far from all NTA institutions have premises, some do have offices—in some cases quite impressive, particularly in an uncertain economic climate. These institutions produce outputs such as books (textbooks or literature in minority languages) and, as noted, are behind numerous events. Positions in NTA institutions can guarantee respectable occupations: while

⁸⁷Interview 1.17, with a Jewish NCA representative, Moscow, 21 October 2015.

⁸⁸Interview 1.12, with a Finnish NCA representative, St Petersburg, 26 October 2015.

⁸⁹Interview 4.2, with an academic, Moscow, 30 May 2016.

⁹⁰Interview 1.12, with a Finnish NCA representative, St Petersburg, 26 October 2015.

⁹¹Interview 1.7, with a Tajik NCA representative, Kazan, 18 May 2016; interview 3.1, with a Tajik NGO representative, Moscow, 22 April 2016.

in many cases representatives of NCAs and peoples' congresses are volunteers, the presence of resources (of the community and local/regional authorities) can at times provide for full-time positions, with titles such as 'director' or 'president' of an NCA. And, in the case of small, dispersed, non-titular nationalities whose members have scarce resources, any state support, even minimal, is all the more valuable.

The limitations of formal processes and systems

While some benefits can be reaped from cooperation with the authorities, involvement in formal (possibly political) processes does not seem to yield many advantages. Instances cited by the respondents in which minority institutions participated in decision-making did not challenge the socio-political *status quo*; rather, they manifested themselves primarily at the 'micro' level, and related to specific, individual cases—as in the case of the minority nurseries referred to above, or through assistance in cases of detention.⁹² Discreet interventions of this type can clearly benefit both parties, yet they do not affect decision-making in the broader sense, systems or *modi operandi* of state organs.⁹³

The fact that NTA and other ethnicity-based organisations have very restricted opportunities for truly independent civic action led those outside the NTA system—mostly the academics interviewed—to designate these institutions as having principally a decorative function.⁹⁴ Yet, among the NTA respondents, it was only a handful who considered discussions with the authorities untargeted and inconclusive: the majority pointed to the existence of a 'dialogue' with state organs. At the same time, their statements were generally vague, devoid of references to specific outcomes of debates (despite direct questions on this issue). This might be because government policies and laws on minority rights themselves tend to be vague and declarative, particularly when linked to Soviet-era narratives of nationalities' 'cultural development': NTA respondents might have judged public officials receptive to their input because exchanges remained at a general, abstract level. The same generality and declarative nature of minority-related law and policies might not, overall, create tangible obstacles to the work of minority organisations, which are instead principally constrained by dominant ways of operationalising inter-ethnic exchanges. When asked specific questions on laws and policies governing their activities, in most cases the respondents did not refer to particular issues of concern. They did not generally consider the registration of an NCA to be in any way complex or reporting requirements (that is, for state grants) particularly onerous: these were described as regular reporting procedures, common to all organisations, bureaucratic and time-consuming though they might be. The 'Foreign Agents' Law, despite having direct implications on the work of public organisations,⁹⁵ was referred to only obliquely by some respondents (although others were more critical).⁹⁶ Likewise, migration law and policy were generally not criticised by those NCAs that provided support to migrant workers:⁹⁷ these respondents argued that migrants' hardships primarily stemmed from a lack of knowledge of Russian legislation—a problem that

⁹²As discussed above on p. 16.

⁹³Interview 4.2, with an academic, Moscow, 30 May 2016.

⁹⁴Interview 4.3, with an academic, Moscow, 22 October 2015; interview 4.4, with an academic, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015.

⁹⁵See below ('Crimes' and punishment).

⁹⁶See below ('Crimes' and punishment).

⁹⁷It was, however, criticised by the representatives of an NGO providing assistance to migrants (interview 3.3, Moscow, 30 May 2016).

could be circumvented through advice and information. Yet Russian and international human rights organisations have stressed that Russian immigration legislation is highly complex, impractical and very frequently amended,⁹⁸ minimising the options for foreign migrants to work legally in Russia.⁹⁹ Thus, these respondents operated, and cooperated with government organs, in line with the latter's rules of engagement, displaying, again, a general acceptance of existing practices.¹⁰⁰

The few respondents whose opinions diverged from government narratives gave much more detailed answers, perhaps because they had already publicly exposed themselves as holding oppositional viewpoints. For example, an ethnic Tatar in Bashkortostan (also an MP in the regional *Duma*) criticised the expectation that NCAs be loyal to the state, which, in his opinion, limited the scope of action of the regional Tatar NCA in his republic:

The NCA is an organisation that is loyal towards the local authorities, the local authorities support it. Recently there was a conference at a high level, fully supported by the government, and unfortunately not a single problem was raised there.¹⁰¹

The same respondent stated that raising 'unusual' political issues in public settings could simply result in their being marginalised, for breaking the unwritten rules of engagement. He believed that the principal problem affecting Bashkortostan's Tatars was the preservation of the Tatar language, given the (in his opinion) dwindling efforts to teach it in schools; to the question as to whether this issue was raised in the regional *Duma*, he replied:

Unfortunately, we can't now. Why did I start dealing with politics? I understood that we held meetings, we held pickets, [and] issues are not resolved To resolve a problem, you need to yourself go to an organ of power But unfortunately, at the moment, our parliament is completely under the control of the organs of state power of the Republic of Bashkortostan. And raising these issues does not work, because the majority don't support [these efforts], for different reasons. Some are afraid that this can lead to a conflict, to tensions, [they say] 'You start raising this issue, and the Bashkirs will be against, it can lead to conflict' I tried raising these issues, but they don't even get to the plenary At the first step, this issue is already suffocated.¹⁰²

⁹⁸See, for example: 'Russia: Mass Detention of Migrants: Racial Profiling, Arbitrary Detention, Harsh Detention Conditions', Human Rights Watch, 8 August 2013, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/08/russia-mass-detention-migrants>, accessed 8 November 2016; 'Letter to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights of Migrants and UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues', Human Rights Watch, 16 January 2014, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/16/russia-letter-un-special-rapporteur-human-rights-migrants-and-un-independent-expert>, accessed 8 November 2016; '(Third) Opinion on the Russian Federation', Council of Europe ACFC, ACFC/OP/III(2011)010, 24 November 2011, §125–30, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008c6a6>, accessed 17 March 2017.

⁹⁹See also Reeves (2013), Abashin (2013).

¹⁰⁰They might also have realised the limitations of the system but decided to adjust, to benefit from the few advantages it offered, possibly hiding their true feelings during interviews.

¹⁰¹Interview 2.4, with a representative of the World Congress of Tatars, Ufa, 26 May 2016.

¹⁰²Interview 2.4, with a representative of the World Congress of Tatars, Ufa, 26 May 2016.

Talking about the World Congress of Tatars (WCT) and its possible impact on Russia's nationalities policy, he said:

I think that it should impact, it should impact. Again, for what reasons public organisations are formed? If it's only for entertainment, singing songs, dancing, celebrating *sabantui* [a Tatar summer festival]—for this, such a big organisation is not needed. A smaller organisation would be enough. If there is such a big organisation, it should be for the resolution of problems At the moment [the WCT] is not enough Yes, it tries [to do something], it gives us books, textbooks, but for the resolution of this problem [the loss of the Tatar language in the republic] it's not enough to just publish books, to hold events, there should be also a political solution. The fact is, for this we need to adopt laws, and laws are adopted through politics, through parties, through political solutions.¹⁰³

This brings us to another factor in the non-viability of formal processes and institutions: caveats in the Russian legal system. Regional legislation is circumscribed by federal legislation within a highly centralised legal and judicial system—centralising trends having consolidated under Putin (Hyde 2001; Mitin 2008, p. 58). Meanwhile, the limited practical impact of legislation on minority rights, including the NCA Law itself, has meant that legal reform has not been a sought-after activity of NTA institutions.¹⁰⁴ For example, a respondent argued that the adoption of the NCA Law had not resulted in the creation of a mechanism for its implementation,¹⁰⁵ thus, she argued: 'what is needed is to clearly write down rights and responsibilities. If the law says that the state has to develop languages of national minorities, let it elaborate on concrete institutions and responsibilities'. The reality, she believed, was that 'the [NCA] law does not work and I do not think that it will be implemented at all'.¹⁰⁶ This was echoed by another respondent, who, with reference to the NCA Law, stated: 'As it happens in Russia, nobody has any intention to observe it: a law is a law and life is life. It is difficult to bridge these two notions'.¹⁰⁷ The lack of viability of systems, policies and laws leads to NTA institutions often having no choice but to become complicit in preserving policies that might not—overall—advance their aims.

'Crimes' and punishment

There are not only few advantages in transcending a 'culture-only' framework, but also clear risks: the state can employ punitive measures against civil society for engaging in activities that are perceived as colliding with dominant government objectives or political narratives. For instance, the leader of a network of organisations promoting a minority culture claimed that its various branches

¹⁰³Interview 2.4, with a representative of the World Congress of Tatars, Ufa, 26 May 2016. Another respondent from Bashkortostan, head of an NGO promoting Tatar culture, including publications on Tatar history, while very appreciative of the activities of the WCT, stressed that its scope of action was limited because it was confined to the cultural sphere. She was even less positive about the Tatar NCA, both at the federal and regional level, which she considered insufficiently active. Interview 3.7, Ufa, 23 May 2016.

¹⁰⁴The Council of Europe's ACFC has noted that the rights of NCAs listed in the NCA Law are not supplemented by corresponding obligations of the state authorities. See '(Third) Opinion on the Russian Federation', Council of Europe ACFC, ACFC/OP/III(2011)010, 24 November 2011, §72, 267, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008c6a6>, accessed 17 March 2017.

¹⁰⁵Interview 1.10, with a Lithuanian NCA representative, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016.

¹⁰⁶Interview 1.10, with a Lithuanian NCA representative, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016.

¹⁰⁷Interview 1.9, with a Jewish NCA representative, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016. By referring to the absence of practical means to realise the law, the respondent meant a lack of funds.

mostly ... work in the cultural field: supporting their cultural traditions, trying not to engage in any kind of political activities. We remind them not to become involved in any kind of political activity, since it leads to the closure of the organisation When it comes to culture nobody bans [an organisation].¹⁰⁸

The extremely flexible interpretation of ‘political activity’ could not be shown more clearly than in the way the concept has been applied by the Ministry of Justice with reference to the 2012 ‘Foreign Agents’ Law.¹⁰⁹ Pursuant to this law, any organisation that receives foreign funding and engages in ‘political activity’ must register as an ‘organisation performing the functions of a foreign agent’. Activities that influence policy-making and public opinion are designated as ‘political’.¹¹⁰ According to Human Rights Watch, in March 2017 the official list of active ‘foreign agents’ included 100 organisations.¹¹¹ The expression ‘foreign agents’ has a clear association with espionage activity, in addition to the law imposing cumbersome obligations on reporting on activities and the auditing of foreign funds.

As ‘political activity’ can be elastically interpreted, effectively any organisation could be encompassed by it. An example is the NGO *Nuori Karjala* (Young Karelia), added to the list of ‘foreign agents’ for ‘political activity’ that amounted to, first, receiving a \$10,000 grant from the United Nations to conduct training events on linguistic rights for activists promoting Finno-Ugric languages in Karelia and, second, hosting a group of foreigners (Finns) in Karelia for a study trip.¹¹² Confronted with having to register as a ‘foreign agent’, the organisation closed in August 2015, later re-registering under a different name.¹¹³ A respondent from *Nuori Karjala* considered the lack of a definition of ‘political activity’ highly problematic, and pointed to the impossibility of separating politics from culture:

Our organisation is not a political one, it is a national-cultural one, and we have always stressed this. However, it is not so easy to separate these spheres. Let us, for example, take the sphere of education. The situation with teaching in national minority languages is getting worse and worse. I work in this sphere and I know it for sure. It is difficult to separate culture and politics in this particular field The most difficult thing is to understand what is ‘political’ activity and whether

¹⁰⁸Interview 3.2, with the representative of a Ukrainian NGO, Moscow, 16 May 2016.

¹⁰⁹Federal’nyi zakon 121-FZ, ‘O vnesenii izmenenii v otdel’nye zakonodatel’nye akty Rossiiskoi Federatsii v chasti regulirovaniya deyatel’nosti nekommercheskikh organizatsii, vypolnyayushchikh funktsii inostrannogo agenta’, 20 June 2012, available at: <http://base.garant.ru/70204242/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

¹¹⁰The law states that: ‘A non-commercial organisation ... is considered to take part in political activity ... if ... it participates ... in the organisation and implementation of political actions with the objective of impacting on decision-making by the state organs, with a view to changing their policies, and also [if it participates] in the formation of public opinion’. This paragraph was added by the ‘Foreign Agents’ Law to Art. 2 of a 1996 law: Federal’nyi zakon 7-FZ, ‘O nekommercheskikh organizatsiyakh’, 2 January 1996, available at: <http://base.garant.ru/10105879/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

¹¹¹A total of 158 organisations was included in the list; in 22 cases the ‘foreign agent’ status was later revoked, while 33 organisations ultimately shut down. See, ‘Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups: The Battle Chronicle’, Human Rights Watch, 24 October 2016, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle>, accessed 17 March 2017.

¹¹²Various organisations promoting environmental protection have also been targeted. See ‘Another Nature Conservancy Group Falls Afoul of Russia’s “Foreign Agent” Law’, Bellona, 16 September 2015, available at: <http://bellona.org/news/russian-human-rights-issues/russian-ngo-law/2015-09-another-nature-conservancy-group-falls-afoul-of-russias-foreign-agent-law>, accessed 8 November 2016.

¹¹³‘Killing an Indigenous NGO, Softly: A Tale from Putin’s Russia’, *Uralistica*, 28 September 2015, available at: <http://uralistica.com/profiles/blogs/killing-an-indigenous-ngo-softly-a-tale-from-putin-s-russia>, accessed 8 November 2016.

what you are doing qualifies or not. It depends on the authorities, on how they decide We are not aggressive or negative towards the authorities, however we are in such circumstances, we work in such a field—languages of national minorities—that we have to deal with the authorities, and somehow deal with political issues.¹¹⁴

Another respondent observed that the fuzziness of the expression ‘political activity’ caused her to wonder: ‘maybe the fact that we’re meeting here [giving an interview to a foreign researcher] is already a political activity, who knows?’¹¹⁵

The overlapping of politics and minority issues has further been linked to security issues and at times ‘extremism’. Calls for switching the alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin for the Tatar language in Tatarstan were linked to threats to national security (Derrick 2009, p. 55). The Russian authorities tend to err on the side of caution: organisations have been found guilty of extremism under Russian law—and their documents placed on a Federal List of Extremist Materials¹¹⁶ or their webpages blocked—even when not posing a direct threat to public order.¹¹⁷

According to a respondent, raising politically unpalatable questions in the federal *Duma* during discussions on inter-ethnic issues resulted in his later being excluded from subsequent consultations.¹¹⁸ Another respondent, who had been elected as the deputy leader of a regional Tatar NCA, argued that his conciliatory but not unequivocally pro-government approach would always preclude him from becoming the main leader of the institution.¹¹⁹ While it is difficult to corroborate this type of information, the leader herself, who was also interviewed, displayed positions that fully mirrored the ‘official line’.¹²⁰ Raising controversial issues—not (politically) aligned with government positions—can indeed be problematic. A respondent, a member of a minority NGO in Kazan, referred to the case of a member of the nationalist organisation Tatar Public Centre, Rafis Kashapov, who in 2015 was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment on the grounds of inciting ethnic hatred and separatism for condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea.¹²¹ Another respondent, the head of a regional Ukrainian NCA, reported receiving threats from the Federal Security Service (FSB) for his ‘support of Ukraine’s territorial integrity’.¹²²

¹¹⁴Interview 3.6, with the representative of a Karelian NGO, Petrozavodsk, 27 April 2016.

¹¹⁵Interview 1.10, with a Lithuanian NCA representative, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016.

¹¹⁶Pursuant to Art. 13, Federal’nyi zakon 114-FZ, ‘O protivodeistvii ekstremistkoi deyateli’nosti’, 25 July 2002, available at: <http://base.garant.ru/12127578/>; and Ukaz Prezidenta RF ‘Voprosy Ministerstva yustitsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii’ 1313, 13 October 2004, available at: <http://base.garant.ru/12137238/>, accessed 17 March 2017. The list of ‘extremist’ materials can be found at: <http://minjust.ru/ru/extremist-materials>, accessed 17 March 2017. Materials are declared ‘extremist’ by a court of law. This has occurred even when materials have not directly incited violence or social hatred. The list had over 3,200 items in 2016 (see ‘Inappropriate Enforcement of Anti-Extremist Legislation in Russia in 2015’, SOVA, 3 June 2016, available at: <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/misuse/reports-analyses/2016/06/d34694/>, accessed 1 November 2016).

¹¹⁷The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis argues that the vagueness of Russia’s extremism provisions has been employed to prosecute political opponents or simply non-mainstream groups. See, ‘Inappropriate Enforcement of Anti-Extremist Legislation in Russia in 2015’, SOVA, 3 June 2016, available at: <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/misuse/reports-analyses/2016/06/d34694/>, accessed 8 November 2016.

¹¹⁸Interview 3.3, with the representatives of an NGO providing assistance to migrants, Moscow, 30 May 2016.

¹¹⁹Interview 1.13, with a Tatar NCA representative, Ufa, 25 May 2016.

¹²⁰Another respondent stressed the alignment to official positions of the leader of one of the peoples’ congresses. Interview 3.6, with the representative of a Karelian NGO, Petrozavodsk, 27 April 2016. Moreover, some respondents, while not referring to direct manipulation of voting systems for the election of leaders of NCAs and peoples’ congresses, spoke about indirect ways to influence voting patterns. Interview 1.13, with a Tatar NCA representative, Ufa, 25 May 2016; interview 3.6, with the representative of a Karelian NGO, Petrozavodsk, 27 April 2016. See also Abramov (2010) on the Mordovian people’s congress.

¹²¹Interview 3.8, with a Tatar NGO representative, Kazan, 20 May 2016.

¹²²Interview 1.14, with a Ukrainian NCA representative (location not disclosed to guarantee the respondent’s anonymity), 24 April 2016.

The implications of remaining 'outside politics'

Some respondents found constraining the fact that state-supported programmes on minority cultures required moulding themselves around existing, dominant narratives—particularly the Soviet concept of ‘friendship of peoples’, itself situated within a Russian patriotic framework. These respondents perceived the activities they engaged in, which required adjusting to this framework, as not ultimately conducive to the preservation of minority languages and cultures. For example, an (already cited) respondent believed that inter-ethnic festivals did not address the needs of his community, but rather amounted to a superficial attempt at demonstrating an attention to diversity.¹²³ By contrast, the respondent had requested funding from the local authorities to address what he and his colleagues considered its ‘real needs’: the production of a newspaper; scholarships for young people to attend specialised university courses on the community’s language and culture (with a view to feeding the newly acquired skills back into the group); intensive language courses (training teachers and compiling textbooks); and support for a museum. There had been no reply from the local authorities.¹²⁴ While in other regions initiatives relating to language courses and museums have been supported,¹²⁵ inter-ethnic festivals have remained the centrepiece of programmes for the promotion of minority cultures.¹²⁶ The cited respondent’s own interpretation of the lack of support was that ‘it is not interesting [for the authorities] to give real support, with a real product. It’s more interesting to make some loud event, some coloured—coloured by local people—event’.¹²⁷ The scarcity of resources is a problem that often affects NTA (and other ethnic) organisations, limiting their scope of action even if they remain within the realm of languages and cultures.¹²⁸ If the respondent was correct in his interpretation, this situation can create a vicious cycle by which organisations wishing to gain financial support do not propose projects that are innovative or target specific needs. It suggests a scenario in which the state might not aim at enhanced accommodation of minorities and their cultural rights, but rather the preservation of the existing inter-ethnic equilibrium, by confining the expression of ethnic identity to repetitive cultural production. On the subject of ethnic festivals, the respondent added a particularly poignant observation:

¹²³Interview 3.5, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015.

¹²⁴These activities had been proposed mid-2015 to the relevant municipal authorities, after a call to ethnic organisations to submit their proposed plans of activities for 2016, to be considered for financial support. A reply, whether positive or negative, has to be provided within 30 days, but—the respondent said—the proposal and subsequent correspondence had remained unanswered by the time the interview took place (October 2015).

¹²⁵This type of decision seems to be also linked to the preferences and inclinations of particular public officials in different regions. See also Prina (2016, pp. 207, 224).

¹²⁶A focus on (folkloristic) festivals can be observed in Russia’s reports to the Council of Europe Advisory Commission on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC), in which these events feature prominently. For example, see ‘(Third) Report submitted by the Russian Federation’, Council of Europe ACFC, ACFC/SR/III(2010)005, 9 April 2010, pp. 30–43, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008b7c3>, accessed 17 March 2017.

¹²⁷Interview 3.5, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015.

¹²⁸As noted, funding from abroad is restricted by the ‘Foreign Agents’ Law. Even before its adoption there were obstacles to the receipt of foreign funding (see Prina 2016, pp. 168–74).

I can compare us to circus dogs, when children say: ‘I want to see the dogs play football’. And we are such dogs. So the government would like to show how they support these people [persons belonging to national minorities], and that these people are coming [to attend events].¹²⁹

Paradoxically, within this cultural *milieu*, the same respondent also referred to a (government-driven) politicisation of culture, in the sense that events and discourses around ethnic diversity could be manipulated by political actors to produce particular outcomes in political processes. For example, he described what was ostensibly a cultural event celebrating ethnic diversity in his region, which took place (strategically, he suggested) immediately prior to gubernatorial elections, and which was a ‘very, very politicised event’. The concert—the event’s highlight—was preceded by one hour of self-promotion by the incumbent. He added:

Everybody understands it clearly, all participants. And it was a pity, I was very sad for our old people who went there to represent the district ... because they are tired of it, they are tired of being a decoration. They would like to receive real support.¹³⁰

Another respondent referred to events that incorporated pro-government propaganda and promotion of UR.¹³¹ Thus, festivals could then be employed as ‘decoration’—to use the respondent’s expression—around more pressing objectives that transcend culture, such as the consolidation of the existing socio-political order. As a result, an outsider to the system (an academic) echoed a civil society respondent (cited above) in saying that the demarcation line between political and cultural spheres of activities is more blurred than it is purported to be.¹³² It is primarily the state that shapes rules of engagement and is the ‘producer’ of both culture and politics. Again, it is reminiscent of Soviet practices of inducing absorption into the Party as the only manifestation of politics. As Hirsch writes: ‘in the Soviet Union, where all spheres were politicized, all forms of participation—going to a museum, critiquing and an exhibit, writing in a comment book—were political acts’ (Hirsch 2005, p. 226). In such a scenario the ‘cultural’ and the ‘political’ become hardly distinguishable.

In light of this, some respondents from minority organisations expressed their disagreement with the overly enthusiastic depiction of Russia’s model of diversity management by representatives of the Russian authorities.¹³³ They further opposed the requirement of loyalty: for example, one respondent argued that in a society there should also be space for radical views that involved opposition to mainstream politics.¹³⁴ Talking about members of the nationalist Tatar Public Centre in Ufa, he said:

¹²⁹Interview 3.5, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015.

¹³⁰Interview 3.5, with the representative of a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015.

¹³¹Interview 3.6, with the representative of a Karelian NGO, Petrozavodsk, 27 April 2016.

¹³²Interview 4.3, with an academic, Moscow, 22 October 2015.

¹³³Interview 1.2, with representatives of a German NCA, Kazan, 21 May 2016; interview 1.10, with a Lithuanian NCA, Petrozavodsk, 25 April 2016; interview 1.12, with a Finnish NCA, St Petersburg, 26 October 2015; interview 3.5, with a (Finno-Ugric) ethnicity-based NGO, St Petersburg, 27 October 2015; interview 3.6, with a Karelian NGO, Petrozavodsk, 27 April 2016.

¹³⁴Interview 2.4, with a representative of the World Congress of Tatars, Ufa, 26 May 2016.

First, they are radical, and second ... there remains, for the most part, old people The organisation is alive but unfortunately not strong But in principle I believe that such an organisation should exist—a radical organisation should *also* exist, because if all organisations will just be loyal, or just say that all is fine, all is alright, then there will not be a movement forward. If we want some kind of progress there should be different views, including radical views.¹³⁵

In his opinion, this was the polar opposite of the regional Tatar NCA.¹³⁶ A ‘culture-only’ framework amounted to acquiescence which did not allow for such a ‘movement forward’. These respondents’ rejection of the system of diversity management can be likened to Geremek’s description of dissidents under communism and their ‘refusal to participate in falsehood’ (Geremek 1992, p. 3).¹³⁷

Conclusion

Through NTA institutions, and ethnic policies more broadly, Russia’s narratives of ‘cultural development’ of ethnic groups, already widespread in the Soviet period, have been consolidated. While NTA respondents had differing perceptions of ‘politics’, they generally expressed the view that their activities had—and should continue to have—a (near-)exclusive cultural dimension, perhaps dictated by a form of ‘cultural purism’ on which their work was seen to hinge. This replicates a folkloristic and ethnographic—as well as ‘apolitical’—approach to inter-ethnic relations, as the activities of ethnic institutions continue to be guided by cultural schemas that persist as powerful Soviet legacies.

By primarily positioning themselves as cultural (and/or educational) centres, respondents from NTA institutions often indicated that politics, policies and laws were relatively unimportant to them. Many seemed satisfied with the existing institutional design in the sphere of diversity management and displayed a general acceptance of (or acquiescence to) existing processes, despite restricted opportunities to influence decision-making on matters affecting them. They referred to the presence of dialogue with the authorities or, at times, avenues to influence some processes indirectly. Even the (far fewer) respondents who were openly critical of the system for diversity management only rarely expressed a wish to engage in political processes. Rather, they would have welcomed more substantial and wider-ranging opportunities in the cultural sphere, so as to better preserve their ethno-cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. The very small minority who were vocal about the need for political solutions to their concerns argued that the present political environment was not conducive to them.

Meanwhile, minority institutions opting to remain within the confines of ‘cultural development’ of nationalities have adjusted to the country’s political reality: an environment with limited room for manoeuvre, where the trajectory of ‘development’ is circumscribed, and where officialdom provides the overarching framework and meta-narratives through which

¹³⁵Interview 2.4, with a representative of the World Congress of Tatars, Ufa, 26 May 2016. The Tatar Public Centre had been prominent in the 1990s. In the opinion of the interviewee, the reason why the organisation’s members were ‘radical’ was that they had nothing to lose: ‘these people are pensioners, old, and they are not afraid of anything ... they are retired, they have a pension’. In the respondent’s opinion, younger people are more preoccupied about their future, especially if they have or are planning a family.

¹³⁶Interview 2.4, with a representative of the World Congress of Tatars, Ufa, 26 May 2016. See also a citation by the same respondent on the Tatar NCA, p. 19.

¹³⁷This refusal can turn political inaction into political action (Geremek 1992, p. 4).

minority cultures may be expressed.¹³⁸ NTA institutions sometimes fulfil important social functions in a difficult socio-political climate, with micro-interventions that can be of direct benefit to individuals. They receive a form of social recognition and make use of some channels for the expression of their cultural uniqueness. At the same time, even in the cultural sphere, NTA opportunities are restricted by the paucity of resources, the absence of mechanisms of implementation of minority laws and policies, and a centralised political system. A distance from ‘politics’ can result in an absence of influence (both in the cultural and political spheres) that is only partially resolved through the use of informal practices and networks.

A small number of respondents from minority NGOs and (less often) NTA institutions expressed their dissatisfaction in interviews and, at times, their refusal to participate in what they considered ‘falsehood’, to use Geremek’s expression (1992, p. 3). They saw very limited scope for independent action or agency within political processes, while ethnic institutions were often mobilised by the regime in support of its objectives. Yet deviation from existing narratives—transcending culture to cross into (non-mainstream) ‘political activity’—can be penalised, as any activity may be labelled as political and/or ‘extremist’. The founding of an organisation such as an NCA can then be a protective measure, signalling a willingness to remain within the confines of the existing socio-political order and eclipse alternative (non-state) loyalties. One can thus differentiate between active involvement in political processes and having a function within a (politicised) cultural environment—the latter a trend that could be described as ‘national in form, Putinist in content’. While NTA institutions have few avenues to advance minority rights through political or quasi-political processes, their activities are infused with politics, creating a system in which culture and (mainstream) politics ultimately converge.

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¹³⁸Coercion of civil society is a feature of authoritarian or hybrid regimes. In the context of Russia, see for example Robertson (2009, 2010), Shevtsova and Eckert (2001). At the same time, this article has pointed to additional reasons for the focus of NTA institutions on culture.

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Appendix. Cited respondents

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Ethnicity (if declared)</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Interview location</i>	<i>Interview date</i>
1. NCA	1.1	German	M	Kazan	21 May 2016
	1.2	German	M	Moscow	27 May 2016
	1.3	Azerbaijani	F	Moscow	23 October 2015
	1.4	Tatar	F	Kazan	24 June 2015
	1.5	Azerbaijani	M	St Petersburg	28 October 2015
	1.6	Armenian	M	Kazan	20 May 2016
	1.7	Tajik	M	Kazan	18 May 2016
	1.8	Uzbek	M	Kazan	17 May 2016
	1.9	Jewish	M	Petrozavodsk	25 April 2016
	1.10	Lithuanian	M	Petrozavodsk	25 April 2016
	1.11	Tatar	F	Ufa	23 May 2016
	1.12	Finno-Ugric*	M	St Petersburg	26 October 2015
	1.13	Tatar	M	Ufa	25 May 2016
	1.14	Ukrainian	M	Unspecified to guarantee anonymity†	24 April 2016
2. People's congress	1.15	Ukrainian	F	Saransk	17 June 2015
	1.16	Jewish	M	Saransk	16 June 2015
	1.17	Jewish	F	Moscow	21 October 2015
	2.1	Mordovian	M	Moscow	20 October 2015
	2.2	Mordovian	M	Saransk	18 June 2015
3. NGO	2.3	Mordovian	M	Saransk	19 June 2015
	2.4	Tatar	M	Ufa	26 May 2016
	3.1	Tajik	M	Moscow	22 April 2016
	3.2	Ukrainian	F	Moscow	16 May 2016
	3.3	Chechen	M	Moscow	30 May 2016
	3.4	Finno-Ugric*	F	St Petersburg	28 October 2015
	3.5	Finno-Ugric*	M	St Petersburg	27 October 2015
	3.6	Karelian	F	Petrozavodsk	27 April 2016
4. Academia	3.7	Tatar	F	Ufa	23 May 2016
	3.8	Tatar	M	Kazan	20 May 2016
	4.1	N/A	F	St Petersburg	30 October 2015
	4.2	N/A	M	Moscow	30 May 2016
	4.3	N/A	M	Moscow	22 October 2015
	4.4	N/A	M	St Petersburg	27 October 2015

Notes: * Other than Mordovian; † the information provided by the respondent might compromise him/her if identified.