

Challenges to Russia's Civil Unity and Internal Stability from Religious, Ethnic and Regional Extremism

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Abstract: Based on field research of 2022-2024, the article analyses the threats to the civil unity and internal stability of Russia from religious, ethnic and regional separatism. Research was conducted in different regions of the Russian Federation, where different types of extremism as an ideology and its practical manifestations were most evident. Religious extremism was studied using the case of the Republic of Dagestan, where in-depth and expert interviews were combined with a questionnaire survey. Ethnic extremism was studied on the case of Russia's Kazakhs, residing mainly in the regions bordering Kazakhstan and migrant communities in the Moscow and Yaroslavl regions, using the method of in-depth and expert interviews and focus groups. Regional extremism was studied by the same methods in two groups of Russian regions: in the republics of Altai, Buryatia, and Kalmykia, and in the republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. Based on the study data, it can be concluded that attributes of the formation of religious, ethnic and regional extremism do exist, but in none of the regions are they crippling or irreversible. The main factors for rejection of the surrounding world and formation of extremist versions of its alteration are the insufficient effectiveness of state and public institutions for economic and social self-realization and distrust of the authorities. Also to blame is the not entirely successful resistance of all-Russian ideology against slogans of radical Islamist transformation being actively developed in different world countries.

Keywords: religious, ethnic, regional, and civil identities, All-Russian unity, challenges, solidarities

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Foreword

According to the official statistics, the Russian Federation has seen an increase in extremist crime (see Table 1) in the recent years. This fact highlights the extreme urgency of studying extremism and its causes. Researchers usually single out particular aspects representing their scope in given studies on the subject of modern extremism, including religious extremism. Criminological, religious, psychological aspects of this phenomenon may also be addressed. Based on the methods of research and the accumulated data, our analysis in this article will focus on the social prerequisites of extremism, the factors that determine the emergence of ideas and attitudes leading to commission of activities that are subsequently qualified as extremist. Federal Law “On Countering Extremist Activity” (2002), is the basis for the legal qualification of actions defined as extremist and refers to such activities as: “forcible change of the foundations of the constitutional order.... public justification of terrorism and other terrorist activities; incitement of social, racial, national or religious hatred; propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of a person on the basis of their social, racial, national, religious or linguistic affiliations or religious attitudes; violation of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of a person and a citizen depending on their social, racial, national, religious or linguistic affiliations or religious attitudes; obstruction of citizens’ exercise of their electoral rights and the right to take part in a referendum or violation of the secrecy of voting, combined with violence or the threat of use of violence; obstruction of lawful activities of state bodies, local self-government bodies, electoral commissions, public and religious associations.”

Table 1. Number of terrorist and extremist offences registered in the Russian Federation in 2020-2023

	2020		2021		2022		2023	
	Terrorist crime	Extremist crime	Terrorist crime	Extremist crime	Terrorist crime	Extremist crime	Terrorist crime	Extremist crime
Russia	2342	833	2136	1066	2233	1566	2382	1340

Source: Interfax 2024

It is easy to see that at the heart of all these actions is the desire to hinder the established legitimate order, the existence of existing relationships between people and the principles of their perception of each other. Tishkov characterizes extremism in a similar way: “Extremism is a form of radical negation of the existing social norms and rules of the state by individuals or groups” (Tishkov 2021, 106). More specifically, Islamic extremism (radicalism) is understood

as “an ideological doctrine and underlying socio-political practices, which are characterized by the norm and value consolidation of the ideological, political, ideological and even armed confrontation of the “true” Islamic world aimed against the world of “infidels” outside and the false faithful within Islam and requires absolute social control and mobilization (ideological allegiance) of its supporters” (Dobaev et al. 2013, 29).

In this case, at the grassroots of confrontation and mobilization also lies the impossibility of accepting the existing “world of infidels and false faithful” by the “true Islam” supporters. It is easy to see that the driving force of such mobilization is the idea that some qualities of the surrounding world and the people inhabiting it are incompatible with the characteristics that a certain group endows “their” world, the only one worthy of existence. Accordingly, “the other world”, should be amended and reshaped in accordance with these ideas.

In the case of religious extremism, as had already been highlighted, the criteria for the true/false world are formulated by religious doctrine and its understanding by specific bearers of such views. Ethnic extremism stems from the special needs and risks of the current situation precisely for our ethnic community. Regional extremism is looking for opportunities to alter the status of our region’s residents by changing the terms and rules of interaction with other regions and supra-regional structures.

Objectives and Methods of the Study

Accordingly, the purpose of our work is to study the factors that contribute to the formation of a mindset among certain categories of the Russian Federation population that threatens the self-perception of the citizens as a single and integral subject of the entire set of social relations. The achievement of this goal can be facilitated by solving the following tasks:

- (1) Identifying the prevalence level of ideas among various categories of the Russian population, that determine the dominance of local types of identities and loyalties, exceeding general civil solidarity;
- (2) Determining the factors and conditions where such types of ideas and self-perception models are formed among the citizens, and
- (3) Developing recommendations aimed at alleviating the conditions contributing to the formation of ideas that threaten the single civic identity and solidarity of Russia’s population.

Certainly, extremist ideas may not be only religious, ethnic or regional in nature. They can be formed on the basis of people’s ideological or political views, their

involvement in certain types of activities, but that is outside the scope of this study. It should also be noted that the ideas underlying religious extremism will not be studied here through religious analysis of the provisions of particular faith's doctrine. Instead we will examine their impact on the statements and behavioral motives revealed across sociological research.

The methods of studying the factors of emergence of extremist ideas are of holistic character and dependant on the characteristics of the explored audience. Thus, religious extremism was studied using the case of the Republic of Dagestan, which remains the regional leader in singular ratings for this type of crime. Field research was conducted in 2020-2022 within the framework of the project "Ideological Foundations and Practices of Radicalism and Extremism" of the Program of Fundamental and Applied Research "Ethnic-Cultural Diversity of Russian Society and Strengthening All-Russian Identity" (Order of the President of the Russian Federation No PR-71 of 01/16/2020). It included a questionnaire survey of young people (300 respondents), psychological examinations of families of those involved in terrorist and extremist activities and expert interviews with representatives of the authorities and religious organizations throughout various regions of the republic.

Ethnic extremism was considered via the impact on civil identity and solidarity by group values and loyalties widespread within ethnic Kazakh communities (approximately 600 000 people according to 2021 data) residing in the southeastern regions of the Russian Federation along the border with the Republic of Kazakhstan. Research included expert and individual interviews, as well as focus groups conducted among young people in September-October 2023 and March-April 2024.

Sharing similar goals, a study of the attitudes in and around the labor migrant communities (approximately 3-4 million people in the Russian Federation), was conducted through individual interviews and focus groups in the Moscow and Yaroslavl regions in September 2023 and January-May 2024.

Signs of regional extremism were probed by analyzing attitudes among mainly young people, in two groups of the Russian Federation regions: Buryatia, Kalmykia, Altai Republic, for one part, and secondly, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. In all cases, the study was conducted by expert, individual interviews and focus groups in October-November 2023 and January-May 2024.

Approaches to the Study of the Prerequisites of Extremism

In the study of extremism as a social phenomenon, the key question is the social conditions that become a breeding ground for the formation and assimilation of

ideas and views of an extremist nature. In the above-mentioned work, Tishkov sees the cause of extremism in “the social disorientation of some citizens, their insufficient education, the crisis state of society, weak public control institutions and an ineffective justice system” (Tishkov 2021, 106). Different authors also see the causes of extremism in “the crisis state of society”, which is characterized by “deformation of political institutions; a sharp drop in the living standards, unemployment, deterioration of social prospects for significant part of the population; a sense of social and personal failure, incompleteness of life...” (Novikova and Novikova 2014, 12). Other researchers focus on the study of youth extremism, but its attributes are also similar to those mentioned above: including “a complex socio-psychological nature: psychological origins.... are the intrapersonal contradictions generated by ambivalent manifestations; whereas – the state of crisis of modern Russian society and social uncertainty are among the social roots” (Sushchenko et al. 2017, 44).

Authors from regions with a high proportion of extremist crimes are more specific in their definitions of extremism causes. According to Ibragimova from Chechnya, “the main causes of extremism are the following: 1) dissatisfaction of the individual with the socio-economic situation in the country; 2) third-party informational and ideological influence on the individual; 3) disagreement with state policy as a whole or on individual issues; 4) disgruntlement with the state authorities” (Ibragimova 2022, 133). Saidov from Dagestan sees the reasons for “dissatisfaction with the current socio-economic situation in the country” in “socio-economic inequality, sharp property stratification, which are the results of the post-Soviet socio-economic policy of the Russian state. Socio-psychological splits, social injustice, and growing inequality in all spheres of society are the reality of today, which in modern conditions leads to negative results” (Saidov 2023, 63). Nuradiyeva from Chechnya sees the determinants of youth extremism in a similar way: first of all, it is “a rift in society – the seizure of most of the material wealth in the country by a certain circle of people, leaving only poverty and deprivation for the rest”. This situation, which undoubtedly appeared unfair in the view of young people, caused the feelings of disillusionment with the country and society, a sense of loss of personal prospects and despair. The state of hopelessness in the situation was expressed in the creation of informal youth groups and anti-societal movements. Moreover, such people are able to realize their vitality and potential in various subcultures. There, “refuge” is found by the young people alienated from society, which in turn is generated by an important component of human nature – to aggregate to society (Nuradiyeva 2023, 550-551).

As a result, almost all researchers are unanimous in their understanding of the

main factors of the emergence of extremism in the modern Russian Federation: the lack of conditions for self-realization within the framework of existing state and public institutions among some part of the population, especially the youth, the search for attractive ways of identification with communities that lend a sense of comfort and respectability. Let's learn to what extent the materials of field research conducted across different regions of Russia over the recent years confirm these findings.

The Main factors in the Formation of Religious Extremist Consciousness and Countermeasures on the case of the Republic of Dagestan

According to statistics, the number of terrorist crimes in Dagestan, despite falling from 723 in 2020 to 332 in 2022, amounted from 15% to 30% of the national total. Although the level of extremist crime also dropped during this period from 8% to 5% of the total extremist crime in the Russian Federation, it also remained one of the highest among other regions. These figures unequivocally indicate that prerequisites for the formation of extremist sentiment exist in the Republic of Dagestan (for more details, see Savin and Starostin 2022).

The results of the survey, which was conducted in all districts of the republic, mainly among the youth audience, showed statements that could be disseminated as extremist (the demand for the establishment of the Sharia administrative and legal system in the country, the introduction of the principles of Quranic ethics into the public consciousness, etc.) in the respondents' answers, however not dominant. With that said, it is determined that the spread of religious statements is caused by the demand for a fair world order, which, according to the survey participants, cannot be achieved by the principles of political engagement that are currently common (elections, work in local self-government bodies, etc.). In other words, people do not believe that the current world order, dissatisfactory to them, could be changed in the course of gradual political transformations.

In such conditions, rises the attractiveness of the principles of social life based on the principles of religious communities, as they are depicted in the sermons of religious preachers. People do not foresee effective ways to transform the imperfect world, thus they willingly trust fallacious views that fail critical comprehension. In addition, note the clearly recorded in the respondents' answers desire for quick financial gains along with rejection of legitimate means for gaining such outcomes, (hard work and gradual improvement of living standards). This leads to the willingness of young people to respond to risky offers for quick enrichment through solicitation to participate in the extremist and terrorist activities. Additionally, as part of the study, 15 anonymous interviews

were conducted in Dagestan with family members (mothers, sisters) of those going to Syria and dying there or accused of extremist and terrorist activities and aiding and abetting them in the republic. An analysis of these tragic stories showed that the specific style of relationships in families led to these men looking for an opportunity to implement family attitudes to success. All parents praised their sons for sporting feats (in Dagestan - wrestling, martial arts), acts showcasing machismo, positive personal outcomes in career and earnings. Social values and the good of society escaped these family narratives. Clarifying questions put to parents about the mode of communications with the children reveal the authoritarian nature of parental behaviors. It is no coincidence that Dagestan shows high incidence of family abuse, along with high levels of latent, unexpressed aggression.

Among women, many followed their partners, and yet there were also those who tried finding own fortune, happiness and comfortable lifestyles. Amidst women committing or preparing to commit suicide bombings, troubled lives were evident for approximately 50% of the total. There are also cases of radicalization of women in families. Even close relatives (sisters) sometimes do not know the hearts and minds of their relatives, with confidential discourse uncommon in the family. It is not by chance, that women sought comfortable lifestyles mainly in Islam dominated countries. Given the spread of ideas about the primacy of religious identity made Mecca the first and foremost capital of Dagestan Muslims followed by Makhachkala and Moscow. It is clear that in such conditions the family and neighborhood community could not become the main channels for the socialization of young people and ceded this role to professional preachers from among their peers religiously educated outside the region.

Expert interviews were designed to identify patterns of influence on the formation of ideas (including extremist) that form the worldviews of young people, the conditions of the external environment: economic features, the labor market, the functioning of state and public social and ideological institutions. Our interlocutors were researchers and journalists, employees of district and city administrations, religious and public institutions.

According to the heads of district administrations, with number of legal jobs growing in recent years and simplified taxation, many young people have returned from the city to the villages and engaged in entrepreneurship, which has led to a reduction in extremist and terrorist crime. Statements by activists and leaders of religious organizations allow us to conclude that at least two models of the spread of religious views in society coexist and compete among the youth. One allows for the interaction and cooperation of different types

of values (both religious and secular) within the worldview of communities and individual citizens. The other prefers to oppose the bearers of secular and religious values and norms as antagonists. In these conditions, the temptation for young people to take an extreme point of view increases, not only due to the internal evolution of views, but also the desire inherent in young people to see everything in a contrasting light of the contraposition of “us and them”. By the same token, there is a wish to be part of the community of bearers of the only true views. Furthermore, the confrontation of religious formulations only reflects the confrontation of quite secular general social motives and aspirations of individuals and communities. However, since the most common and socially approved form of communication and comprehension of the surrounding world is Islamic ethics and rhetoric, any confrontations are perceived as religious conflicts.

Findings

Statements that indicate that religious identity and solidarity with brothers in faith mean more to their authors than the awareness of belonging to Russian citizenship are found in about 15% of respondents’ answers. According to experts, the share of people involved in extremist activities on a religious basis is markedly smaller yet. Still in some situations, such sentiments can encompass larger groups of young people, as the incident at the Makhachkala airport on October 29, 2023, showed. Several hundred people broke into the airport building, demanding to prevent the arrival of Israeli citizens against the backdrop of the war in Palestine. This indicates that in a dormant state, extremist sentiments to some extent retain their influence on the worldview of young people.

This raises the relevance of studying the factors leading to the formation of radical religious ideas. Including the following: insufficient development of state and public institutions that contribute to the economic and social self-realization of young people, increasing their status and respectability in the eyes of others; features of the psychological climate in a family with elders’ authoritarian style of dominance, which does not imply relationships of trust and support for wavering sons and daughters, pushing them into the hands of preachers who are speaking in plain terms and offer young people vivid, albeit illusory visions of the future; lack of alternatives to religious ethics and rhetoric, which has been propagated over the past 30 years as the only condition for post-Soviet revival and spiritual development. The formation of a confrontation between secular and religious ethics and morality, and weak trust in local authorities and public

institutions, which increases the attractiveness of alternatives to problem solving through participation in religious extremist organizations.

In order to reduce the influence of the above factors on the worldview and behavioral models of young people in Dagestan, it is necessary to create the following conditions: active involvement of young people in entrepreneurship and other forms of self-realization within the framework of existing state and public institutions, increasing the confidence of young people in the ability of these institutions to solve their problems and offer support in becoming upstanding citizens; assistance in changing the style of relationships in the family and in society as a whole, the development of interaction practices based on mutual trust and openness, the reduction of authoritarianism and brutality under the guise of traditionalism as the only characteristics of communication from older to younger, from men to women, etc.; and, diversification of the ideological space, introduction of ideas about the possibility of non-religious spirituality and respectability outside the framework of religious ethics and the influence of religious communities, and raising the significance of individual, professional, civic identity and resulting solidarity and loyalty.

Ethnic extremism impact on the level of civil solidarity in Russia

Researches of the factors of radical forms of ethnic solidarity competing with the general civil identity were conducted on the example of studying the sentiments of the Kazakh population of the Russian Federation in the regions bordering Kazakhstan and migrant communities in the Yaroslavl and Moscow regions.

Kazakh residents of Russia

In total, 6 focus groups and 15 in-depth and expert interviews were conducted in this direction in the Astrakhan, Volgograd, Orenburg and Samara regions. Our interlocutors were activists of Kazakh ethnic cultural organizations, as well as teachers, journalists, and university students. Studies have shown that the signs of the dominance of the ethnic identity of the Kazakh population of the Russian Federation over the all-Russian one are follow: 1) Some young people perceive information coming from private Internet channels from Kazakhstan as an important factor in the formation of an active political worldview. Regular familiarization with the materials of Kazakh sources has become a kind of “fashion” among young Kazakhs, perceived by them as part of the strategy of “ethnic revival”, along with the use of elements of ethnic costumes and traditions in important ceremonies (weddings, funerals) and trips to Kazakhstan to the

“land of ancestors”. Information from Kazakhstan is uncritically perceived by young people, because it has an aura of “its own”, independent, as opposed to “official”, which allegedly has only a propaganda orientation and does not carry truthful information. Although the analysis of information messages received through some Kazakh channels also showed that some of them were produced in Ukraine, have a clear anti-Russian orientation and also cannot be neutral. Among them is information that disproportionately many Kazakhs are dying in the fighting in Ukraine, who give their lives for the “Russian world” they do not need), and 2) In recent years, some young Kazakhs have begun to perceive visiting Kazakhstan as an element of familiarization with the ethnic spiritual tradition, the only correct choice of place of residence. This circumstance made it easier for some young Russian citizens of Kazakh origin to move to Kazakhstan in the fall of 2022, in order to avoid partial mobilization into the Russian army.

An analysis of the statements of experts and young participants in interviews and focus groups allows us to conclude that the dominance of ethnic identity over the all-Russian one has not become a mass phenomenon. Most Kazakhs combine these types of identity and solidarity without much internal conflict: “First of all, we are Kazakhs, but we are Russians (rossiyane, citizens of Russia - I.S.) and our patriotism is no different from the mood of other peoples of Russia.” Moreover, some respondents noted “our Russia’s Kazakhs, when they come to Kazakhstan, to Uralsk, to Astana, “as if they feel, well, how to say, their own among strangers, a stranger among their own.”

Russian citizens by Kazakhs ethnic origin are not used to some archaic social practices of Kazakhstani Kazakhs associated with emphasizing their ethnicity, ancestry, a more brutal type of relationship between themselves, condescending and sometimes dismissive attitude towards women. This is especially disliked by representatives of the older and middle generation of Russian Kazakhs, who are used to communicating in Russian with their non-Kazakh neighbors and colleagues.

Our interlocutors commented on the fake news about the excessive proportion of dead Kazakhs in the special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine.

“A lot of ours. This is especially true for the Police. A lot of Kazakhs work in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in the Traffic Police, hold the position of district militia officers and agents of mobile groups. Kazakhs are also among the employees of the Prosecutor’s office, the Investigative Committee of the region, and the Federal Security Service.”

That is why, in their opinion, many Kazakhs turned out to be participants of the SMO, resulting in a high mortality rate. Respondents were outraged by the opinion that Kazakhs are dying “not in their own war.” “Death and tragedy affected all families, regardless of nationality.” Moreover, it was suggested that there were repeated reproaches on social networks from Kazakhs to their ethnic Russian peers who left for Kazakhstan, afraid of mobilization – “You ran away, abandoned your country, turned traitors and now we defend Russia instead of you.” We were told about a young Kazakh who, living near the border with Kazakhstan, had the opportunity to take a queue at a checkpoint for those wishing to leave for Kazakhstan. Then he sold his position in the queue, bought the necessary ammunition and individual equipment, and volunteered for the SMO.

Kazakhs from rural areas of the border regions (where the share of Kazakhs in the total population exceeds 50%) demonstrate a high-level patriotism and community spirit, whereas among urban Kazakhs there are more of those who hide from call to active duty. However, such picture is typical for the population of the whole country. According to our interlocutors, the mention about participation in SMO is a motivation for groom seekers in special marriage services within the Kazakh community. Patriotic sentiments among Kazakhs are also facilitated by the fact that there are more faithful and religious people among them, and the position of official mosques is also aimed at supporting the authorities' actions.

So, on February 15, 2023, at a general meeting of Muhtasibs (deans) and imams of the Orenburg region, Chairman of the Regional Spiritual Administration of Muslims Alfit Sharipov stressed:

“Do not stop helping our military forces, mobilized soldiers... After each salah in our mosques, we pray that our children will return to their families alive and well with Victory.” In order to attract new volunteers up the line, information sheets and campaign booklets on contract service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation have been placed at the entrances to mosques since June 2023. Spiritual leaders and representatives of the clergy began to conduct explanatory work, publish announcements about the recruitment of foreigners with the possibility of accelerated acquisition of Russian citizenship on the pages of their official newspaper “Muslims of Orenburg Region” (Amelin et al. 2024, 163).

Thus, the preliminary conclusions should include the following: The conflict of ethnic and civil solidarity for a part of the Kazakh population in 2022-2024 took place, but did not acquire a massive and irreversible character. No systematic extremist calls of an anti-Russian nature on the part of Russian Kazakhs have been recorded on social networks since the beginning of the SMO. The conflict between Israel and Palestine in the fall of 2023 received a much greater response among Kazakhs from Russia. Most of the young Kazakhs, being adherents of the Islamic faith, actively sympathized with other Muslims. Running away from Russia has not become widespread for Russia's Kazakhs. Only respondents aged 20-25 years old noted that they personally know people who left Russia. Our older interlocutors said that nothing had changed in their environment, and some even noticed that "in this unfavorable situation, the inhabitants of Russia rallied, including the Kazakhs." At the same time, it cannot be denied that the discordance of opinions and the departure of thousands of young Russian Kazakhs from Russia has an adverse psychological impact on the Kazakh community, as it once again reminds of the discrepancy between ethnic and civil solidarity and the place of Kazakhs in modern Russian society.

An important factor is the negative perception by young Kazakhs of the place of their community in modern life in Russian regions as a result of invisibility in public cultural life, lack of opportunities for systematic study of the Kazakh language. Such sentiments are not dominant, but they are present among part of the youth audience due to the "intrusive reminder" because of close borders. Young people also note that there are few Kazakhs in the political leadership of the regions, although Kazakhs are overrepresented in the national security, defence and law enforcement agencies and municipal governments of some territories. The most acute shortage of Kazakhs is felt among teachers and researchers in the humanities, whose task would be to formulate the interests of Kazakhs in the field of public or media presence at the regional and federal levels. In addition, the anti-Russian content of some channels in social networks transmitted from Kazakhstan in Russian and Kazakh has a negative impact on the Russian identity of Kazakhs. Today, in Kazakhstan, the events of shared history are covered in a biased way (as a constant pressure of the empire on the Kazakh hordes in previous centuries), but there is no one from the side of Russian Kazakhs to give a qualified answer, as scientific institutes are located in Moscow.

The following activities can be recommended to reduce the negative impact of these factors: a) in order to strengthen the stability of Russian identity among Kazakhs, citizens of Russia it is advisable, in our opinion, to expand the

teaching of the Kazakh language in the areas densely populated by Kazakhs of the Russian Federation, perhaps, to establish schools with teaching in the Kazakh language, in order to knock the ground out from under the ever-present accusations of “suppression” of Kazakh culture in Russia; b) also positive perception of Kazakhs as Russian citizens would be the inclusion in the regional elite not only of security and law enforcement bodies among ethnic Kazakhs, but also of representatives of scientific and artistic community, who would form in the regional public cultural space the image of Kazakh culture as one of the components of the identity of Russian regions; c) it is equally important to resist the powerful information flow of anti-Russian character, which is directed at Russian Kazakhs, especially young people from foreign channels in social networks, including from the territory of Kazakhstan. There are already permanent daily Telegram channels of Kazakh organizations (Volgograd region) promoting information about young Kazakh heroes who received awards in the SMO; information about honouring the dead is also published there, thus creating an alternative to biased information about the increased mortality of Kazakhs. But such channels are clearly insufficient, as they are countered by much more diverse and technically advanced inaccurate information of an anti-Russian nature. The examples of heroic struggle of Kazakhs for the interests of the Russian state in the previous centuries (Jangir Khan, the Bukey Horde, his descendants) should be more widely disseminated. At that time, these interests coincided with the interests of the Kazakh khans as they saw the historical trajectory of development of their societies. Today, such information is clearly not enough.

Migrant Communities and Their Perception by the Local Population

Migrant communities are also a prime example of collisions of different types of identities and solidarities, which sometimes take on a radical Islamist character. It is enough to recall the shooting of fellow soldiers by Tajik soldiers at a training ground in the Belgorod region on October 15, 2022. Then 11 people died. The ethnic Tajiks who opened fire on the Russian military allegedly wanted to take revenge on the commander for his anti-Islamic statements. (Mynes 2022). In the same row is the shooting of 4 Tajik extremists on behalf of ISIS at a concert at Crocus City Hall in the Moscow region on March 22, 2024. Then more than 100 people were killed and injured, which did not add confidence in migrants from the residents of Russia. In addition, during 2022-2023, there has been an increase in the number of media reports criticizing the presence of a large number of migrants in Russian cities, their lack of knowledge or poor knowledge

of the Russian language, their commission of a large number of crimes, as well as defiant behavior. The published statistics do not confirm the increase in the number of crimes committed by migrants in Russia (no more than 3% of the total), but anti-migrant sentiment is increasing.

In the Yaroslavl and Moscow regions in August-September 2023 and January-March 2024, 10 focus groups and 30 individual and expert interviews were conducted among different categories of local residents (age, rural and urban settlements, types of employment) and migrant workers mainly from Central Asia (age, migration experience, type of activity). Research in the Yaroslavl region, where there are not many migrants, shows that a positive perception of integration has not yet become widespread in the region. There are people who believe that “all people have the right to freedom of movement and the arrival of foreigners to us is evidence of the attractiveness of our region” or “good people come to us, contributing to the development of the region.” But they are common in large cities among those who have had direct experience with migrants. Other categories of urban residents are much more wary and hostile towards migrants. These are young men who are concerned about the behavior of groups of young migrants aggressively behaving in the streets and young girls who are tired of the annoying attention from visitors to them. In addition, residents of small towns and villages are not very friendly to migrants. They have little real interaction with them, they consider migrants to be “threatening” us, “who came to impose their norms”, etc. The attitude towards migrants is even worse in the Moscow region, where there are many more of them (about 1 million people are officially registered) and where local residents constantly encounter them, having no experience of positive interaction with them and not understanding “why there are so many of them.”

The situation of the last two years has also influenced the attitude of locals towards the integration of migrants. Sometimes this influence is positive. There are men who served in Ukraine with Uzbeks and Tajiks and this made them friends. Sometimes respondents assumed that a common challenge (the deterioration of Russia's relations with other countries) would bring both locals and visitors closer together. But more often it is mentioned in a negative context. Some people believe that SMO is a filter that will allow us to identify people loyal and necessary to Russia among migrants. In their opinion, most of them will not defend their new homeland and this should affect a stricter migration policy. In the same village, a young agricultural worker mentioned mobilization and self-defense as a factor in increasing the vulnerability of locals to migrants: “if we all go to war (SMO), then they (migrants) stay next to our children and wives.” In this context, about half of the respondents admit open conflicts with

migrants in the future, although they do not see any real prerequisites for them.

Based on the conducted research, the mood among migrants can be briefly described as moderately alarming. Our interlocutors, foreign citizens legalized in Russia, noted that over the past year the situation in the country in terms of interaction with local people has become tenser, although it has not led to any open excesses. There has been more attention from law enforcement agencies, and the time frame for reviewing documents for legal stay in Russia has increased. They assess the level of distrust on the part of local residents as increased. Some of the respondents did not answer the question about citizenship, which indicates the nervousness of migrants about the possibility of being mobilized if they accept Russian citizenship. Obviously, some Russian passport holders have hidden or destroyed their Russian passports and are again registering as foreign citizens.

All migrants have heard about the raids and about the persuasions to participate in the SMO, but allegedly no one have directly encountered this. All the participants in the study have acquaintances who volunteered for the army and there are those who left the country (to avoid mobilization to SMO). The latter, apparently, are more numerous. At the same time, our interlocutors understand the motives of the behavior of both. They know stories when a citizen, for example, of Tajikistan, usually over 40 years old, volunteered to be contracted for SMO, because he believed that at the moment his motherland is Russia, not Tajikistan, and after his retirement he expects to obtain Russian citizenship and build a career there. But, nevertheless, most migrants are confident that open conflicts with locals are possible, as mutual distrust is increasing.

Young people from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with little experience of life in Russia (3-5 years) are the most vulnerable in terms of readiness for extremist behavior. They tend to live crowded, together with their own and have a worse command of the Russian language. They are the ones who feel the most alienation from the locals and hostility from the police, and they, in turn, act as the main irritant for the locals, because they continue to use their usual forms of public behavior and cannot easily contact with the locals, avoiding this. According to our interlocutors, at least half of all migrants belong to this category and they are open to changes both towards greater integration into the host society and towards socialization through islamization and radicalization. In the last year, the latter scenario has become more common due to the fact that such an important factor of integration as obtaining Russian citizenship has lost its appeal.

In 2023, the situation in relations with migrants in the Kotelniki area and metro stations around there (Moscow region) worsened. In one of the schools,

migrant parents demanded the exclusion of non-halal dishes from the school canteen menu, which scared local residents, who were also excited about plans to build a new mosque nearby. According to our observations, in this area, local residents are more likely to meet with migrants identified phenotypically than with each other. There are spontaneous patrols of local men who meet their wives and daughters at the subway and bus stations to protect them from unwanted meetings with groups of migrants walking after work. Such groups of migrants are perceived by the locals as the result of the conscious mobilization activities of visitors to intimidate old-timers. All this can be avoided by mutual informing on the part of local authorities about desirable public behavior in order to avoid conflict situations. But while no one is doing this, mutual distrust and tension are growing.

As a result, it seems that the potential for radicalization around migrants is quite significant. About half of the respondents, both migrants and local residents, are ready for open confrontation with each other. On the part of the locals, radicalization occurs on the basis of general anxiety in the country and uncertainty about the future. In these conditions, the presence of large groups of “strangers” next to each other, which can also be perceived as a threat to the existence of “our world” by the “them” who arrived.

In turn, migrants feel increased hostility towards them from the locals. At the same time, the attractiveness of integration into the local community and the prospects of becoming a full-fledged citizen of Russia has decreased, since the new status entails mobilization and sending to a war zone. In such conditions, the influence of “brothers in faith” increases, who offer their options for embedding into a new reality through collectives of their “true believers” who will strive to change the hostile world around them by radically reorganizing it according to their own rules. The fact that many people choose this path is evidenced by the increase in terrorist crimes throughout the country.

In order to prevent mutual distrust, it is necessary, on the one hand, to openly inform local residents about the purpose of migrants’ arrival and their contribution to the economy of various regions. On the other hand, migrants should be offered a simple and transparent scheme of integration into both the Russian labor market and Russian society. But while the system of attracting migrant workers is not transparent, this is not happening and alarming trends are increasing.

Summing up, it can be noted that there are signs of competition between civil and ethnic identities and solidarities based on them, but this competition is based not on ethnic differences themselves, but on ineffective management of the process of embedding ethnic characteristics into the social and cultural diversity

of Russia. Where social orders are the same and relevant to everyone equally, there is no sharp confrontation. This can be seen in the example of the Kazakhs of Russia. Where culturally distinct communities also have different legal and social status (the case of migrants), mutual rejection is gradually escalating.

Would Regional Identity be a Threat to All-Russian Unity?

A feature of the federal structure of the Russian Federation is the existence of national (ethnic)-state entities, that is, among 95 territorial entities, there are 21 where main subject of power is formed on the basis that part of the population has the status of the titular population, after which this territory is called. In 2023-2024, we conducted research on the challenges of civil identity from the regional side among Altaians (titular population in the Republic of Altai etc.), Bashkirs (Bashkort) in the Republic of Bashkortostan, Buryats in the Republic of Buryatia, Kalmyks in the Republic of Kalmykia and Tatars in the Republic of Tatarstan. The research was conducted using the methods of expert and in-depth interviews, as well as focus groups for young people.

Two groups were identified among the studied regions, each of which included subjects of the federation with a similar socio-demographic and economic profile and style of relations with the federal government.

Small regions "Ad Marginem"

The first group included the Republic of Altai (210 thousand people, 0.14% of the total population of the country), the Republic of Buryatia (967 thousand people, 0.67%) and the Republic of Kalmykia (266 thousand people, 0.18%), which are characterized by a small population, underdeveloped industrial sector, dependence on the federal budget, lack of conflicts of leadership by the federal government and, as a result, a small share of recognition in the federal media space.

Altai youth in Gornoaltaysk (Altai Republic) complained that their republic is often confused with the neighboring Altai Territory, respondents from Buryatia, located in the south of Eastern Siberia, 5 thousand km from Moscow, said that they felt disconnected from Russia and unable to influence decisions made in the Center. The same sentiments prevail in Kalmykia, where they are supplemented by concern for the weak development of the economy and the decline of pastures as a result of predatory exploitation by residents of neighboring Caucasian republics. But in the spring and summer of 2022, Ukrainian propaganda, seeking to divide the peoples of Russia, began to

inflate the role of the Buryats in the fighting in Ukraine, creating an image of “ferocious Asians” destroying a civilized European country, but after a year and a half the situation calmed down and today the Buryats, like residents of other republics remote from Moscow, feel “marginalized” in a large country. Residents of Altai and Buryatia, located on the border with China and Kazakhstan and China and Mongolia, feel their marginality not geographically, but socially and economically and do not have separatist aspirations to join these neighboring countries. On the contrary, SMO made it possible for unemployed rural youth to improve their well-being and the well-being of their loved ones by participating in hostilities in Ukraine, even at the cost of their own death. But, since there are no other social lifts in rural regions, participation in the SMO, albeit in such a tragic way, has “tied” remote regions to Russia.

The greatest negative impact on the all-Russian identity of the titular inhabitants of the studied regions is the weak development of ethnic languages, the transition of young people to Russian language and xenophobia towards Buryats, Altaians and Kalmyks in the central regions of Russia, where they are mistaken for Chinese or Kazakhs from outside Russia. But it is unlikely that these sentiments are capable of causing systemic anti-Russian extremism. In the worst case, there are interethnic youth fights, as it was in Buryatia in the 1990s, when a significant part of the Russian population left there. Today, the absolute majority of residents of the titular nationality of the three studied regions quite comfortably combine both ethnic and civil identity, and even the watersheds that arose in society after the start of the SMO in February 2022 are formed on the same grounds as in other subjects of the federation: 1) age, the younger, the less supportive it is; 2) the level of education, people with higher education often do not support; 4) rural and urban areas, rural areas have higher support than urban areas; 5) well-being, the higher it is, the less support it has. Public sector workers are more supportive than people from the private sector, and 6) religious affiliation does not affect the support of the SMO.

Regions with claims

The second group includes the Republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, which have a completely different situation in the field of socio-economic, cultural and demographic development, are much less dependent on the Center financially and have a much greater influence on socio-political processes in the country as a whole. The Republic of Tatarstan is a donor to the federal budget, both Republics have a population of about 4 million, and are among the 10 largest in Russia by this indicator. In addition, both of them have developed an industrial

sector, including oil and gas production.

Fierce internal political discussions have been unfolding in both Bashkortostan and Tatarstan for decades related to the status of different languages and ethnic communities in society, the level of independence in relations with Moscow. On the other hand, both regions, due to their inclusion in the Turkic transnational linguistic community and the hypothetical “Turan”, have special relations with a number of states outside the Russian Federation (Kazakhstan, Turkey), which increases external influence on the processes taking place inside the country.

With the beginning of the SMO and mobilization in the fall of 2022, the topic of the “exodus” from the country began to be actively covered by bloggers who settled in different countries, especially in Turkey. The issues of gaining Turkic unity, the decolonization of Russia and the creation of the “Big Turan” became more active. These discussions, which are very noticeable on the Internet and sometimes passed off as signs of the “disintegration of Russia,” had little effect on the situation in the republics. In particular, experts noted that these topics did not overshadow or even weaken the traditional confrontation over the “Bulgarian” and “Zolotordyn heritage”, “northwestern Bashkir dialects”, etc. This suggests that the newly emerged watershed lines in public debate are not as deeply rooted, at least not yet, as the issues of Tatar or Bashkir domination in the republics.

Nevertheless, the information coming from bloggers can influence the worldview of those young people who are not able to critically perceive emotional appeals coming from the outside. In particular, on the channel “The very Bashkort”, it is claimed that “Bashkortostan ranks third in terms of losses and today Bashkirs are dying in someone else’s war for Putin’s imperial ambitions... a Bashkir battalion is being created as part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine”, etc. The channel releases of Tatarstan blogger Ruslan Aisin, who now lives in Turkey, are devoted to the recent arrests of representatives of the political, economic, and cultural elite of Tatarstan in the republic, which he considers as the Kremlin’s policy of suppressing people in the republic who are able to have their own position, different from Moscow’s. Undoubtedly, such information is understood by those people who were inclined to protest against the government in the previous period, against the background of personal economic troubles and the impossibility of self-realization, etc. At the same time, an analysis of the comments under the heated discussions on social networks themselves shows that a significant number of people are ready to serve and consider their service in the context of changing their socio-economic status. This applies primarily to rural residents, but it is rare to find condemnatory opinions in comments from their urban peers.

Of course, it must be noted that opponents of the military operation in Ukraine are often simply silent and we cannot find out their moods, but it is obvious that support of SMO is not a marginal opinion. One can speculate about the motives of such an opinion, but it is difficult to dispute its prevalence. Moreover— it is an economic motive, not always the only one. According to the observations of experts, opinions on this issue are quite common among men of 30-40 years of age: “who? if not us”, “who will protect our families”, “the Nazis will come, and I will hide!”. “They say there, experts continue, that this is my homeland, that I have to protect my family. I mean, their families are here too, that’s why.” They say, “we are against Nazism, we are patriots, we are for the motherland, they do not write, we are for Russia, they are for the motherland, perhaps referring to their village or district.” This behavior is in great contrast to the actions of those thousands of residents of Kazan or Ufa who found themselves in Kazakhstan by the evening of September 22, 2022 (mobilization day). The students themselves say during the focus groups that they could not imagine themselves or their peers in the trenches.

Thus, the perception of oneself and one’s attitude to the current situation is largely determined by age and social experience. People who have completed military service and have families turn out to be more ready to personally participate in their military service and explain their tasks to themselves. Students, urban residents of creative professions fearfully try on such a prospect for themselves. In the village, the attitude towards self-employment is different, there it is perceived as one of the acceptable strategies for career and life success. Although there is a lot of criticism from the participants of the SMO about payments, vacations, the order of cars received, etc.

The authorities, fearing a surge in ethnic separatism, have tightened their information policy, but it gives rise to a lot of rumors and a desire to turn to unverified sources, including from abroad. Suspicion of any initiatives from below, reliance on repressive methods of administrative pressure already leads to excesses. So in January 2024, in front of the building of the Baymak district court (eastern part of Bashkortostan), more than 10 thousand local residents and supporters of the environmental and ethnic activist F. Alchinov, who had been convicted the day before of extremist statements, gathered from the capital Ufa. The participants of the spontaneous rally do not agree with the verdict. Over the past few years, environmental rallies have been held in this region against the predatory development of some natural areas (Kushtau Hill) by enterprises from outside Bashkortostan.

These zones “turned out” to be iconic symbolic places for the formation of ethnic Bashkir identity and protests of the environmental agenda in the future,

with the inattention of the authorities, can acquire an ethno-mobilizing character and lead to mass protests in the future. It is easier to stop these “environmental” unrest on the ground, obliging gold developers to reclaim quarries, responding to the requests of local residents and depriving the soil of the calls of Bashkir nationalists to “stand up for their native land.” The authorities did not do this and found themselves in the face of the largest open confrontation between the people and the government in modern Russia.

These demonstrations were suppressed, as were the youth performances in Ufa, the capital of the region, a few days later where about 2,000 people gathered. Although these demonstrations were formed through ethnic mobilization, they did not directly threaten the integrity of the Russian Federation, since the main discontent was directed against local authorities, but they showed the strength of ethnic solidarity in some regions. There have always been strong and influential national elites in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, who maintained a small degree of dissatisfaction with the center in order to bargain for better conditions during negotiations with Moscow officials. So some slogans of an ethnoseparatist nature have always been at the disposal of local youth. The events of January 2024 showed that these slogans retained their impact on the audience, but the scale is no longer comparable to the period of the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of people came out in support of the independence of these regions.

Today, it is obvious that the main irritant is not the politicians from Moscow, but their local officials, who, by their incompetent actions, cause people’s discontent. It is significant that in August 2020, President Vladimir Putin actually supported environmentalists by recommending that local authorities stop mining by private companies, but this was not done. In such a situation, the resources of ethnoseparatism are limited, but they continue to maintain their impact on the situation (Gabdrāfikov 2024, 185).

In order to reduce this impact, it would be advisable to soften the information policy, which strictly regulates any publications on sensitive topics and the style of relations between local authorities and local residents. We need more information from independent private channels that would provide an alternative to foreign negativity, showing the success of young residents of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan in solving career issues, self-realization, participation in charity, and solving environmental problems in the region. But given the closed nature of the formation of the human resources potential of local managers, it will not be easy to implement these proposals.

Conclusions

Moving on to general conclusions, it should be noted that based on the data obtained during the field research of 2022-2024, it can be argued that the prerequisites for the formation of religious, ethnic, regional extremism exist in various regions of the Russian Federation. The threats to Russia's civil unity and internal stability formed on this basis in any of the regions are not crippling or irreversible. The main factor determining these challenges is the insufficient effectiveness, especially at the local level, of the existing state and public institutions for the development of human potential, the inclusion of young people's energy in self-realization in the course of constructive activities for the benefit of the region and the country at large. The activities of local authorities (taking local conditions into account) to create an attractive ideology for participation of different categories of the population in the development of the country at large and in its individual initiatives also appear insufficient. The relevance of alternative ideology, primarily Islamist and locally ethnic under these conditions is on the rise.

Extremist ideas are formed fastest where dissatisfaction with social conditions is combined with a developed ideology of confrontation in its Islamist version. This can be seen in the case of the Republic of Dagestan and migrant communities in Russia. Dissatisfaction with social conditions, expressed in ethnic principles, carries mobilization potential only in locations with previous experience in using ethnic solidarity for political purposes (Bashkortostan, Tatarstan), but even there its resources are severely limited. Even in these regions with a strong centrifugal tendency, the ideology of opposition to central authority is built on an ethnic basis, since the population of the regions is multiethnic and nowhere does the titular population constitute an overwhelming majority. In those regions where the titular population is absolutely predominant (Dagestan, Chechnya), mobilization against existing conditions takes place on the basis of religious slogans. Thus, we can discuss regional extremism proper only rather conditionally.

Minimization of the influence of the above factors can be facilitated by: a) creation of comfortable conditions for self-realization and improvement of people's well-being within the framework of existing state and public institutions, increasing people's confidence in the authorities as effective tools for solving all emerging problems, and b) development of a common civic ideology, including references to the religious and ethnic diversity of citizens, meeting regional needs, and discrediting religious extremism as an illusory path lacking personal prospects.

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Игор Савин

Изазови за руско јединство и унутрашњу стабилност од верског, етничког и регионалног екстремизам

Сажетак: На основу теренског истраживања спроведеног у периоду од 2022. до 2024. године, чланак анализира претње грађанском јединству и унутрашњој стабилности Русије које долазе од верског, етничког и регионалног сепаратизма. Истраживање је спроведено у различитим регионима Руске Федерације, где су различити облици екстремизма као идеологије и њихове практичне манифестације били најизраженији. Верски екстремизам је проучаван на примеру Републике Дагестан, где су дубински и експертски интервјуи комбиновани са анкетним истраживањем. Етнички екстремизам је анализиран на примеру Руса казахстанског порекла, који углавном живе у регионима који се граниче са Казахстаном и мигрантским заједницама у московском и јарославском региону, користећи методе дубинских и експертских интервјуа и фокус група. Регионални екстремизам је проучаван истим методама у две групе руских региона: у републикама Алтај, Бурјатија и Калмикија, те у републикама Башкортостан и Татарстан. На основу података из студије, може се закључити да атрибути формирања верског, етничког и регионалног екстремизма постоје, али ни у једном од региона нису у толикој мери онеспособљавајући или неповратни. Главни фактори који доводе до одбацивања окружења и формирања екстремистичких верзија његовог преображаја јесу недовољна ефикасност државних и јавних институција у обезбеђивању економског и социјалног самореализовања и поверење у власти. Такође, узрок представља и недовољно успешан отпор свеопште руске идеологије према слоганима радикалне исламистичке трансформације који се активно развијају у различитим деловима света.

Кључне речи: верски, етнички, регионални и грађански идентитети, свеопште руско јединство, изазови, солидарности