

“SIBIRIAK”: COMMUNITY, NATIONALITY, OR “STATE OF MIND”? *Summary*

Alla Anisimova, Olga Echevskaya

The study of Siberian identity is becoming vital today due to the rising importance of regional self-consciousness in Russia in general and the Siberian region in particular. This is manifested through increasingly active attempts by people living in the Russian regions to make claims regarding their interests to the federal center and to attract attention to region-specific social and economic problems. One can also observe a rising interest in regional history and culture. Besides, the results of the latest all-Russia census revealed such manifestations of the regional self-consciousness as new national self-identifications, including, among others, the “Siberian” one. In light of this emerging trend, the study of Siberian identity today is a socially significant project.

This article describes social identity as *the product of social and political activity, as the interactive development of collective self-consciousness, solidarity, and group cohesion that are needed for any collective action*. Social identity is understood both as a product of social and political activity and as the basis for further activities.

The social constructionist perspective on Siberian identity is the most productive one for it allows us to explain identity formation among the mobile frontier men and migrants that make up Siberian society. On the whole, through this perspective identity is seen as changeable, permanently reconsidered, and contextual.

We have chosen the actionist approach to social identity as the most useful of the constructionist perspectives. This approach begins from the supposition that identity is constructed through ongoing, active interaction between the individual and the surrounding social and physical world. The individual “becomes somebody” through enacting certain actions within a particular context. Identity, in such a view, is less a quality of the individual than a capacity to classify the reality around him or her in a certain way based on their mode of interaction with this reality.

Based on this actionist approach, we arrive at a working definition of identity as *a way of classifying the surrounding world based on the collective self-perception of individuals that is shaped in the process of interaction with the surrounding world as a result of social, economic, and political activities of individuals in similar living conditions*.

The research reported in this article was conducted in order to answer the following questions: What does Siberian identity mean for Siberians themselves? What is this common identity as the Siberian people based on, according to different members of the community? What are the social processes shaping this identity? How and when is Siberian identity enacted, actualized, and realized?

To answer these questions, we have designed an explorative study based on qualitative methodologies combining expert interviews and thematic interviews. Such a research strategy allows us to describe a diversity of opinions and insights on the content of Siberian identity and the contexts of its actualization. However, these methods do not allow us to generalize our findings to the entire population of the region, nor can we estimate the prevalence of any of the types revealed in this study.

We assume that the processes of identity formation (Siberian or otherwise) are defined by identity actualization in differing contexts: identity is shaped in situations of interaction or collision with an “other.” It is in such situations of contact that belonging to a social group or community becomes socially significant for an individual. As mentioned above, we are committed to an actionist approach and believe that identity is not given *a priori* (for example, by birth), nor is it shaped once and forever (for example, during the early stages of socialization). It is continually shaped and actualized in the course of an individual’s interaction with his or her social reality. In accordance with this assumption, our sample was constructed to reflect the variety of life trajectories of people living in Siberia and the variety of their involvement in social and economic activities in Siberia.

In order to capture intra-regional diversity we conducted our study in three large Siberian cities: Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Irkutsk. Novosibirsk, located in the southwestern part of Siberia, is a young (founded in 1893), dynamic city—the industrial, cultural, and scientific center of the “new Siberia.” The eastern city of Irkutsk, founded in 1661, has been known as the center of “old Siberia” since the Tsarist era. Its population is more historically “rooted” in Siberia than the population of newer Siberian cities. The city’s location near the famous Lake Baikal, as well as its proximity to China and the Far East region, also contribute to the peculiarities of citizens’ self-perceptions. As for Omsk, it combines features of old and new Siberia being, on the one hand, a Russian historical center founded in 1716 and, on the other, a bustling industrial and trade center with more than a million inhabitants. The geographic location of Omsk is also quite peculiar: it sits at the juncture of two borders—the western border of Siberia and the border between Russia and Kazakhstan. Such peculiarities of historical development and geographical location of these three cities allow us to examine some of the regional diversity of Siberian identities.

Fifteen interviews with inhabitants and five interviews with experts were carried out in each city (for a total of 60 interviews).

From our analysis of the interview data we uncovered some of the categories used by informants to define Siberian identity in all three cities under study. We have also isolated some of the regionally specific Siberian identity definitions particular to each of the cities. On the whole, the results of our study bring us to the conclusion that Siberian identity is shaped as a result of people’s activity in specific conditions of life: territorial, climatic, social, economic, and cultural. In the course of our interview analysis we also managed to distinguish two main forms of Siberian identity actualization. The first is the sociopsychological, or Siberian “state of mind,” represented as the so-called “Siberian character,” which

is described by all informants as a set of specific features and qualities distinguishing Siberians from inhabitants of other parts of Russia. In such a view "Siberian character" can be defined as a self-descriptive stereotype stressing the differences of Siberians as a group from others.

The second form of identity actualization is manifested through civic protest and political claims that can be understood as grassroots enactments of civic nationhood in Siberia. Here, Siberian identity is actualized not just as a set of traits or differences but rather as the manifestation of people's awareness of the specific problems of the region (and their roots in asymmetrical and unjust socioeconomic relations), resulting in common interests and a desire to enact positive changes in the life of their city and/or region (which may in some cases lead to solidarity and collective action).

The study also allowed us to define three core dimensions of Siberian identity: territorial, ethnic, and political.

The territorial dimension of Siberian identity. Siberian identity in its spatio-territorial dimension is shaped through interaction with nature, notions of space and freedom, and experiences of survival under severe climatic and economic conditions.

A peculiar life tempo—ways of managing time, space, and activity—also contributes to Siberian identity formation. We found that the perception and experience of "living far away," as well as the perception of essential social and economic inequality in comparison with other parts of Russia, are important factors shaping this dimension of Siberian identity. It is important to mention that Siberian identity as a spatio-territorial projection is not formed automatically, by the very fact of living in a territory (as is often assumed in many texts on regional and territorial identity), but is shaped through the activities aimed at transforming the environment, overcoming its limitations and its resistance. One may say that here we are dealing not with territorial identities as such but rather with cultural identities that are shaped and actualized in the course of interactions in and with the territory.

The ethnic dimension of Siberian identity. Ethnic diversity is an important part of daily life in Siberia. Living together with people of different ethnic origins forms the "natural background" of daily interactions and contributes to the ethnic tolerance of Siberians. Absence of ethnic diversity is experienced as a meaningful and important one ("lack of 'ethnic'/phenotypically different faces") when Siberians travel to other regions of Russia. This experience of ethnic diversity shapes the overall friendlier attitude of Siberians toward people of different ethnicities and contributes to the specific type of social cohesion, which makes Siberians something more than just people sharing a territory, but rather a specific community based on inclusivity and "being accustomed to diversity."

At the same time, the ethnic origin of the informant and the ethnic background of their family are important preconditions for the formation of Siberian identity on a microlevel, affecting the content and significance of Siberian identity for the individual. Our analysis shows several distinctive ways in which individuals relate

themselves to the category of “Siberians.” These different ways are characteristic of those with different ethnic origins: the individuals coming from “mixed” or multiethnic families, on the one hand, and those from monoethnic families of various ethnic origins (Russians, Germans, Buriats, Kazakhs), on the other.

Siberian identity at the microlevel is more likely to be chosen as an “umbrella identity” which can replace the ethnic one (or “reconcile” all the ethnic categories important for an informant) in cases where it is difficult for an informant to make a choice between the many ethnicities present in his or her family history.

While the choice of Siberian identity as an “umbrella identity” is more characteristic of people from multiethnic families, informants of monoethnic family origins hardly ever use Siberian identity as a replacement for their national or ethnic one. The ethnic component of self-perception in such cases is either the determining or, at least, a much more important factor. Among “Siberians” as a whole then, their understandings of Siberian identity differ: to some, Siberian identity is ethnically inclusive, while for others it is ethnically exclusive (with exclusions justified on the basis of phenotypic differences).

The political dimension of Siberian identity. Interviews from all three cities demonstrate an awareness of the significance of the existing differentiation between European Russia, Moscow, and the territories “over the Urals”—Asian Russia and Siberia. This differentiation is an important context for the actualization of Siberian identity, and it is clearly realized and expressed by our informants. Categorization of the socioeconomic and cultural spaces of Russia in terms of “Moscow versus Siberia,” of “center versus region,” together with a recognition of specific regional problems (as rooted in this differentiation) leads our informants to a protest(ing) form of identity based on an awareness of Siberia’s “colonized” status. At the same time, the intensity of the “colonized feeling” of asymmetry and injustice grows as the manifestations of asymmetrical center-region relations become closer to the informant’s life or work.

This is the context forming the ground for discussions of Siberian civic nationhood as a strategy for the institutionalization of Siberian identity. Civic nationhood is rather an expression of a minority position, articulated mainly (though not exclusively) by informants with higher education who practice a more “activist” form of citizenship—members of the humanitarian intelligentsia, journalists, bloggers, and entrepreneurs.

Overall, the material we analyzed suggests that currently there is an inconsistency between regional self-consciousness (which is grounded in feelings of injustice, often accompanied by activist goals) and civil engagement or activism as such, in which regional interests could be articulated and realized. People living in Siberia are often aware of the specific regional problems and of their causes and are quite critical when describing the situation in the region; at the same time, the majority is unwilling to join either public protests around these problems or larger strategies aimed at solving them. The reasons for this inconsistency are regional-level factors together with a low level of trust and optimism about the possible positive outcomes of collective action in Russia in general.

Solidarity and the collective participation of people living in Siberian cities in solving common problems happen only when the situation relates to (literally) vital interests. The success of civic engagement also depends on the ability and competency in reaching agreement and organizing, as well as on positive experiences with problem solving through collective civil activism; here our research shows significant differences among the cities.

Moreover, our analysis revealed regional diversity in the formation and actualization of Siberian identity, diversity that stems largely from the symbolic status of a city, from the specificity of local problems, from the level of recognition of regional problems, and from traditions of local participation in solving matters of civic importance. For example, an important determinant of cooperation and solidarity is the legacies of previous activist efforts—if a common goal has been achieved as a result of these efforts. A history of negative outcomes decreases collective interest in activist cooperation. In cases where an awareness of common problems is accompanied by an experience of successful collective actions, this contributes to the formation of Siberian identity as a political project. The best example of this can be found in Irkutsk with its rich history of ecological movements and effective civic protests.

The general conclusion of the article is that, despite the differences between different parts of the region, various forms of actualization of Siberian identity—in its cultural, ethnic, political, civic, and other dimensions—are developing today. Moreover, it is likely that in the future the scope of Siberian identity will widen.

This research also demonstrates the usefulness of applying constructionist perspective to the study of regional identities in mobile, "resettled" societies. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the "sphere of influence" of a constructionist perspective in the studies of regional identities will be expanding.

Contemporary societies are becoming more mobile and, in a sense, "resettlement" forces people to change their places of work and residence more and more often, weakening the formerly unquestioned ties among nationality, citizenship, and territory. The world is becoming more accessible to more and more people—if not experientially, then virtually (due to both traditional and new media). In this context, the mechanisms of "automatic" formation of regional identities might stop working altogether. Of course, this does not mean that the mechanisms of identity formation will be the same in all countries and regions, but this definitely makes the study of regional identities—as changing, dynamic, and performative—an important and exciting challenge.