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Territorial Identity of Russian Society: from Local Fragmentation to Civil Harmony

Abstract. Humans are social beings; as such, they enter into relationships with other people that are structured by issues that are important to them and that involve the participation of social institutions. By virtue of habitation on a particular territory, an individual consistently positions him- or herself as a subject of a local community, which in turn, is subsumed within communities having a higher level of territorial organisation. Each level of this hierarchical social structure differs in the degree of its coherence and integrity as manifested in the phenomenon of territorial identity, which expresses the ability of social communities to maintain the solidarity of citizens' commitment to the social ideals and norms of the national state. The aim of the study is to substantiate the prospects and limitations affecting the formation of civil (national) identity of Russian society while taking the socio-cultural diversity and value heterogeneity of local communities into account. Criteria for characterising social communities are formulated according to the structure of territorial identity, which is discussed in terms of its role in the wider system of social identity. Particular attention is paid to the content of municipal identity, within whose territorial format the greatest sociocultural diversity and axiological heterogeneity are observed. On the basis of the results, a number of measures to help overcome local fragmentation and achieve civil harmony are formulated.

Keywords: territorial identity; municipal identity; social community; local fragmentation; civil harmony; territorial community; social structure

Introduction. The collapse of the USSR led to the loss of Soviet identity and consequent erosion of the community of *the Soviet people*. The subsequent development of Russian statehood, which

was accompanied by the denationalisation of property and increased independence of regions and local communities, has given rise to an urgent need to form a civil identity capable of consolidating the interests of the country's citizens by harmonising relations between different levels of public authority.

The process of creating a new Russian state was accompanied by persistent attempts by a number of Federal Subjects to obtain preferential treatment in comparison other regions, which typically involved significant efforts on the part of regional elites. In giving rise to separatist sentiments, this process consequently became a serious threat to Russian federalism, which was not at that time in a state of mature development.

Complex processes were also taking place at the local level. The municipal reform that was carried out during the early 1990s was aimed at creating a network of territorial entities within the country that would assume responsibility for resolving vital issues for the people living there. For this purpose, the law defined a list of so-called issues of local importance, whose resolution became the responsibility of municipal authorities and thus came under local administrative competence¹. However, the development of local self-government was carried out extremely unevenly on a national scale: while, in sparsely populated and remote settlements, low budgetary provision did not contribute to the activation of local elites, the acquisition of the status of public authority in densely populated and geographically attractive territories gave rise to increased civic activity on the part of the population along with noticeable dynamic evolution trends in business relations.

In this regard, it is important to understand to what extent the interests of local communities are compatible with the interests of the state under unstable conditions and external threats, as well as determining how the territorial organisation of local government can contribute to the formation of a new national identity. As a result of the local government system becoming one of the official levels of public authority in 2020, it also becomes necessary to

¹ Federal Law of 28.08.1995 No. 154-FZ "On General Principles of Organisation of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation" (repealed due to the adoption of 131-FZ "On General Principles of Organisation of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation" dated 06/10/2003).

consider how this level may be properly integrated into the structure of national identity, along with a reflection on what factors may hinder such integration.

The Phenomenon of Territorial Identity. The creation of public authorities in the format of regions, settlements or administrative districts led to the transformation of the emerging administrative-territorial units into clearly expressed decision-making centres that organised themselves around the dominant sentiments of the local population. These processes gave rise to the phenomenon of territorial identity as defined by the boundaries of a territorial entity and consolidating the interests of the population living within these boundaries. Territorial identity is interpreted by sociologists as a sense of social community among people living in a certain territory, which forms on the basis of the unique characteristics and meanings that constitute the cultural uniqueness of a given territory (see: Smirnyagin 2007; Shmatko, Kachanov 1998; Govers, Go 2009).

Having contributed to a noticeable decrease in the importance of the border factor in relations between countries, globalising trends reveal the problem of preserving the national identity of modern states and the socio-cultural uniqueness of local communities. For example, the rapid expansion of the borders of the European Union during the 2000s, which was accompanied by the creation of a system of supranational institutions, caused a significant transformation of the regional and national identity of the states included in the union. The unification of states at different levels of socio-economic development and having dissimilar value systems led to a significant transformation of their territorial identity. During this period, many European regions and municipalities participating in the implementation of development priorities established by the EU began to interact directly with centralised development funds, essentially bypassing the national level. As noted by Russian researchers, this led to a change in the nature and essence of the historical memory underlying European identity, as a result of which the national framework of the historical memory of Eastern European countries starts to dominate the entire space of the European Union (see, for example: Lifanov 2021).

As a result of territorial identity, people develop a responsibility for the destiny of both their small and large homelands, thus cre-

ating a basis for the sustainable development of the state through the self-organisation of social communities. The formation of territorial identity, which is generally carried out in the context of preserving historical memory that forms the basis of national unity, necessarily involves an understanding of the various suffering and disasters experienced (see: Fishman 2024; Rusakova 2023). However, multi-level and type-specific territorial diversity does not always contribute to the formation of national-state (civil) identity or to the harmonisation of social, ethno-national and property relations in society.

The phenomenon of social identity has long been the focus of the research interest of both Russian and foreign social scientists. Social identity describes a person's awareness of their place in society as based on identification with a certain social group, which contributes to the stability of this social group and its readiness to withstand numerous threats.

Authoritative researchers of identity theory Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann noted that the world of everyday life has both a spatial and a temporal structure. "The reality of everyday life is organised around the "here" of my body and the "now" of my present time" (Berger, Luckmann 1995: 42). Identification in time describes a person's awareness of their place in the historical process, their belonging to a certain historical community, and the demand for skills and values corresponding to a given historical era. The identification of an individual in spatial terms expresses one's geographical localisation, one's belonging to a particular community living within certain formal or informal boundaries, and an awareness of one's uniqueness and exclusivity in relation to other communities.

Russian research in the field of social identity predominantly examines it through the prism of a psychological approach as a way for citizens to perceive the conditions of their existence and explain their attitude towards these conditions. In this context, the concept of *territorial identity* is used as a set of different forms of human attitudes to the environment, as presented in the concepts of *environmental identity*, *place-identity*, and *urban-related identity* (Samoshkina 2008: 44). Thus, according to G.V. Gornova, "*urban identity* is a person's stable idea of him- or herself as a resident of a certain city, a direct experience of their connection with the city, a feeling

of belonging to the city and its inhabitants, involvement in urban life, a certain complexly articulated sense of a common destiny” (Gornova 2019: 12). Considering the typological diversity of territorial entities at different levels, it should be clear that *territorial identity* is a broader concept than *urban identity*. Since representing the most immediate level of the world in which individuals form their social orientations, territorial identity forms an integral part of social identity, reflecting the position of a person within the boundaries of a certain physical area.

Territorial identity also characterises the ability of people to consolidate their interests within the boundaries of territorial entities at one level or another. Berger and Luckmann viewed identity as a phenomenon arising from the dialectical relationship between the individual and society. “Identity”, they claim, “is formed by social processes. Once crystallised, it can be maintained, modified, or even reformed by social relations. Social processes associated with the formation and maintenance of identity are determined by social structure” (Berger, Luckmann 1995: 279). Territorial identity has many levels that reveal the various aspects of a person’s positioning in social space. The national-state level of social space corresponds to civil identity, while the sub-state level corresponds to regional identity, and the local level corresponds to municipal (urban or areal) identity.

One of the most authoritative Russian researchers of social identity, L. Drobizheva, pointed out that identity is formed not so much by the state as by the efforts of society itself to develop the state’s ability to perform its basic functions. In the interactions of individuals and social communities, many diverse identities can be manifested (civil, ethnic, regional, local, etc.) that lead to the establishment of trusting relationships between the respective parties. It is precisely such combined – rather than opposing – multiple identities that are a sign of the harmonious development of society (Drobizheva 2020). The chief theoretical problem that arises here consists in the fact that, for each society, there is a unique hierarchy of identifiers that underlie these identities – if in one society, ethnic or religious identifiers are of chief importance, then for others economic considerations are of greater significance.

This circumstance contributed to the formation of a network of territorial entities differentiated according to various criteria,

the most important of which were ethno-national, geopolitical and economic criteria. National republics, national municipal districts and settlements were formed in the administrative-territorial grid of the Russian Federation mainly in accordance with the ethno-national criterion. The geopolitical criterion in turn required a special designation of the role of border regions and settlements, geostrategic regions and complex constituent entities of the Federation. Meanwhile, thanks to the economic criterion, a number of territorial entities of different levels have received a certain legal status, allowing them to benefit from the regime of work with residents embedded in this status (territorial development zones, territories of advanced socio-economic development, special economic zones, etc.). The formation of typical behavioural reactions among the population living in a particular territorial entity due to the sociocultural typological diversity of territorial entities has led to certain problems in terms of the compatibility of these reactions with each other and the priorities established by the national interest.

The presence of many territorial entities of different types and levels actualises the problem of harmonising identities and forming a civil identity as the basis for the socio-cultural reproduction of the state. The scientific literature covers quite widely the methodological aspects of the formation of civil, ethnic and regional identity (see, for example: Monastyrsky 2017; Nizamova 2014; Kozhanov 2014). However, despite the increasing importance of this level in the context of municipal reform in the country, less attention has been paid to local (municipal) identity.

The Role of Municipal Identity in Achieving Civic Accord.

The creation of local government bodies in the country to grant a certain independence to territories defined within local administrative boundaries has contributed to the expansion of self-organisation and mobilisation mechanisms for the development of settlements, closer interaction between the population and government bodies in solving problems relevant to settlements, and the timelier resolution of issues facing residents. At the same time, the devolution of powers to resolve a number of administrative issues led to a strengthening of local elites, who took the opportunity to expand their influence on the social and economic processes taking place within the boundaries of their municipalities. In his book *How Russia is Organised*, the prominent social anthropologist Simon Kordonsky

accused some local authorities of trying to organise life on their territory in the style of the former tsarist-era estates. He noted that in such settlements, all property capable of generating income tends to belong to the heads of municipalities, their family members and trusted persons or entrepreneurs, who effectively manage the municipality (Kordonsky 2021). Moreover, with the development and strengthening of local self-government, another, much more dangerous tendency has begun to emerge, which could in the long term lead to the destruction of the foundations of statehood and the spiritual unity of the nation. Here we are talking about noticeable manifestations of ethnic and religious identity characteristics within the boundaries of administrative-territorial entities, which have the potential to form intolerance towards the bearers of other cultural traditions who do not share the values of the local elites. Thanks to the powers with which they have been entrusted, local authorities can concentrate within their sphere of influence centres of destabilisation and aggression that are dangerous for the region and the country, even to the extent of harbouring cells of openly extremist organisations (Silantyev 2009). Thus, in June 2024, a double terrorist attack occurred in Dagestan, resulting in the deaths of 19 people, including a priest and a security guard at an Orthodox church. As it turned out, two of the terrorists were the sons of the head of the Sergokalinsky district of Dagestan, Magomed Omarov. Other participants in this terrorist attack included high-ranking representatives of local authorities².

A certain danger is also posed by the existing disproportions in the socio-economic situation of municipalities, which result in significant differences in the standard and quality of life of the local population. Such inequality, which leads to mistrust on the part of citizens of less developed municipalities towards state institutions, consequently entails increased economic dependence of municipal authorities on state support, ultimately preserving inequality between the municipalities themselves, intensifying competition between them for state subsidies, and producing social tensions (Channov 2019).

² Mironova A. *Institutionalised Wahhabism*, 24.06.2024. available at: <https://360.ru/tekst/obshchestvo/institutsionalizirovannyj-vahhabizm/?ysclid=1z9rbfn9x0746353931> (accessed October 10, 2024). (in Russ.).

The above examples demonstrate the manifestation of trends associated with the formation of local government bodies that are potentially dangerous for Russian society, and which, under certain socio-economic and geographical conditions, can become a source of various threats.

Due to the high intensity of intra-community connections associated with the dominant position of the local administration, the phenomenon of *municipal identity* represents the internal mechanism capable of forming powerful centres of administrative influence within the boundaries of administrative-territorial units.

The concept of *municipal identity* is also widely used in foreign scientific literature. Municipal identity is typically considered in terms of inter-municipal competition and the ability of municipalities to develop independent policies and independently participate in receiving grants from international funds (Borwein, Lucas 2023). A number of authors note the importance of taking into account contextual circumstances, since the development of a person's municipal identity depends on the size of the respective municipality, as well as its socio-economic, cultural, institutional and macroeconomic characteristics (see, e.g.: Bühlmann 2012). Questions also arise concerning the definition of administrative boundaries of municipalities in the context of the delineation of property in agglomerations between metropolitan areas and their suburbs (Tyson 2013). A brief review of publications by foreign authors on the role of municipal identity in the development of modern society indicates a wide variety of its manifestations and the importance of the political and socio-economic context for its understanding.

In most cases, the problem of *municipal identity* can be resolved by referring to the concept of *local identity*. Local identity is considered as an integral part of territorial identity (along with national, regional, republican, provincial, etc.). Most often it is characterised as a socio-cultural phenomenon implying a readiness for socially transformative activity and the implementation of this activity at the level of local communities (Morozova, Ulko 2008). However, in the Russian literature there is also a narrower interpretation of the concept; here, local identity is understood as *local-factory identity*, i.e., something that arises in the context of mass employment, which also references the political activity of enterprises (Vitkovskaya, Nazukina 2018). There is also a trend in research

concerning the socio-professional aspect of social identity at the local level, whose subject is the professional activities of municipal employees (Bannykh et al. 2017; Rocheva 2011).

Municipal identity is realised in at least one of the following forms: ethno-national, religious or civil. For example, the process of establishing ethnic identity is inextricably linked with endowing one's community with certain stereotypical characteristics, contrasting these characteristics with foreign communities and thus separating it from them. An individual, as a rule, tends to positively evaluate the groups to which he or she belongs, giving them preference over outgroups. Research by Russian sociologists has demonstrated the tendency on the part of representatives of a particular social group to consider the beliefs and convictions within their group to be more likely to be true, while the convictions of representatives of other groups are considered more likely to be erroneous (Maximova, Morkovkina 2016: 348).

Of course, in itself, municipal identity does not pose any threats. On the contrary, it is precisely thanks to the consolidation of society around local government bodies and the increase in the overall manageability of the territory that forms of self-organisation and self-development of settlements are stimulated to strengthen their economic influence on nearby settlements. Such a consolidation is in turn what facilitates the acquisition of a civic identity at the municipal level. However, such factors as the absence or poor development of institutions of government accountability, a lack of citizen participation in administrative decision-making, nepotism, or a disregard for public demands, can provoke serious consequences that threaten to destroy civil harmony.

The formation of municipal identity can be carried out autonomously from the development of regional or national-state identity. Municipal identity is formed in a close dependence on the ability of the authorities to competently solve the problems that arise in local communities. The inability of the authorities to fulfil this mission leads to local fragmentation and general apathy on the part of the population. The main identifiers of municipal identity are the participation of the population in local elections, the specific value of municipal budget expenditures, and the scope of civic participation in resolving issues of local importance, etc. Ineffective state policy towards local communities, which results in growing

economic disparities between municipalities or ignoring the real needs of citizens, poses a threat of loss of stability in modern society.

In light of the above, the study of municipal identity formation in Russia appears to represent the most important basis for the development of civil society in the country, being one of the prerequisites for the formation of civil identity, which allows for the smoothing out of ethnic, religious or property differences between settlements.

Towards a Civil Identity. The consolidation of public interests, which forms social cohesion and the identity of citizens with their place of residence, is an objective condition that ensures the stability of society (Nevelichko et al. 2022). However, ensuring the consolidation of the interests of diverse social communities – and especially the social strata that comprise them – appears to be an extremely complex state task. As contemporary scholars convincingly argue, neither the much-vaunted national idea, nor religion, nor public morality can serve as the basis for uniting people (Gorshkov, Tikhonova 2022: 228-250). Civil harmony presupposes a similar value attitude of representatives of different social communities towards public institutions. To identify such similarities, it is important to form a holistic understanding of the content of the spheres regulated by these institutions. Their list includes economic, political, social, socio-cultural and other spheres, whose role is to form norms and rules that determine the activities of people in the most significant segments of the everyday world for them. Ensuring the integrity of these spheres entails making them understandable for social perception and assigning functional roles to the elements that underlie them. The main obstacle to achieving civil harmony and forming civic identity is the inability or unwillingness of government bodies to explain the principles according to which basic social spheres are formed, their importance for the reproduction of local communities and the expected consequences of violating these principles, as well as to provide information about possible measures for restoring the integrity of these spheres as a necessary condition for the development of communities.

One of the possible approaches to overcoming the heterogeneity of local communities and forming a consolidating basis for their interaction with each other may be to fill with legal content

the provision on specific mechanisms for the formation of inter-municipal business entities for the joint resolution of issues of local importance, Article 68 of the Federal Law of 06.10.2003 No. 131-FZ “On the General Principles of Organising Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation”. Inter-municipal cooperation in Russia, which is developing today within the framework of non-profit associations and contractual forms, is mainly aimed at resolving issues of protecting and defending common municipal interests before federal and regional government bodies. Unfortunately, however, the development of organisational and economic forms of cooperation that promote social and economic integration of municipalities has not yet become widespread (Leonov 2022).

Local fragmentation as a factor limiting the formation of civic identity is mainly a result of information asymmetry between elites and ordinary citizens. Under such conditions, the inability of the latter to defend their rights may be due either to their ignorance of such rights or to the vagueness and ambiguity of the rules applying within the boundaries of communities. Thus, the formation of holistic ideas about the mechanisms of development of society and respect for the rights of all its participants is dependent on an understanding of territorial identity in all its manifestations.

Conclusion. The presented study allows us to formulate a number of theoretical conclusions and specific practical recommendations. *Territorial identity* is a complex, multi-level concept that involves many models of citizen behaviour and means for their adaptation to life in social communities. Given the hierarchical system of territorial entities that has developed in the Russian Federation, certain disproportions may arise in the compatibility of types of territorial identity that arise at national, regional, municipal and local levels, which can hinder the consolidation of society and harmonisation of relations between diverse social groups. Local fragmentation at the municipal level is largely caused by the uneven development of local communities and their dependency on higher budget levels, which tends to result in people leaving their native places to realise their destiny elsewhere. The key factors behind such a tendency include the weak involvement of local communities in the processes of solving problems of national importance, the unwillingness of people to influence the development of basic public spheres on which their well-being depend, and the loss of trust in

local administrations. As well as provoking crises of territorial identity at the local level, these factors can stymie tendencies towards social consolidation at higher territorial levels. Under such conditions, it therefore becomes very important to preserve the ability of citizens to play a more active role at the local level: to exercise their right to participate in elections of government bodies and the formation of local budgets, as well as to receive all the necessary information about the state of the social and engineering infrastructure of the settlement, etc. The desire of state authorities to finance local government bodies through centralised funds can hardly be considered a positive factor. As we have seen, such practices tend to increase competition between municipalities, thus creating fertile soil for corruption and hindering civil harmony. Conversely, the development of inter-municipal unions, whose remit includes the implementation of inter-municipal projects in the interests of residents of the municipalities participating in these unions, can be seen as the most important condition for achieving civil harmony.

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