NOTES ABOUT RE-IDENTIFICATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC GROUPS

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From 2006 to 2008, three teams of researchers from Estonia, Finland and Russia carried out a joint research project "Ethnic fragmentation and re-identification as a form of social adaptation of local communities (Setus, Ingrian Finns, Pomors, Izhma Komis)"[1]. The project established research cooperation between the University of Tartu (Estonia), University of Helsinki (Finland), Komi Science Centre (Syktyvkar, Russia), and Centre of Pomor Culture (Arkhangelsk, Russia). In this paper we give an overview of the initial ideas and tasks of our project, the way as we envisioned all this in 2005. In addition, we attempt to estimate the actual progress we have reached during the years of the research process.

In the contemporary world, a number of new political, social and cultural developments appear that concern almost all peoples. It is still hard to determine these changes, as Clifford Geertz puts it:

> "A much more pluralistic pattern of relationships among the world's peoples seems to be emerging, but its form remains vague and irregular, scrappy, ominously indeterminate. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fumblings of the Russia which has succeeded it [---] have brought in their wake a stream of obscure divisions and strange instabilities." (Geertz 2001: 219)

Cultural pluralism and cultural liberty in conditions of increasing globalization processes result, in some cases, not in intensification of cultural homogeneity of the population, but in actualization or even rebirth of local identities, in longing to be culturally distanced from the dominant population. The processes of ethnic differentiation exist both in Russia and in a number of other countries of Europe. The developments of linguistic separatism and multiculturalization "…have produced a sense of dispersion, of particularity, of complexity, and of uncenteredness" (Geertz 2001: 220). A comparative study of the

processes of ethnic fragmentation and re-identification allows revealing certain general phenomena in ethno-cultural evolution of local communities, to understand the reasons of actualization the local identities and to discern general mechanisms of ethno-cultural mobilization at the level of ethnographic groups.

Our research teams compared the processes of re-identification in ethnographic groups which are a part of larger communities; there existed the opinion that the group-wise ethnic specifics are lost and the process of their integration with the main ethnos is completed or close to completion. This concerns the group of the Setus in Estonia, Ingrian Finns (Leningrad Oblast), Izhma Komis in the Komi Republic (Russia) and Pomors in the European North of Russia (Arkhangelsk Region). Recently all these ethnic groups have newly declared themselves and all of them are trying to obtain special status, which would define them not only as ethnic groups belonging to dominating nations of Estonians, Finns, Komis and Russians, but as independent ethnic communities with their own interests and rights.

We supposed that it is possible to find much in common in the ways how these groups position themselves and in their contemporary processes of ethnic mobilization but these developments have also several features, characteristic only to particular groups. The Ingrian Finns live in Leningrad Oblast, Russia, and dominant ethnic groups among them are the Russians (as the neighbouring group and also the main ethnic group of Russia) and Finns (living in Finland). At the same time, Ingrian Finns have been always accepted as a specific ethnic unit. The Setu people, living in their historical homeland situated in the border areas of Russia and Estonia, have a different official status in these countries – in Russia they are officially accepted as a distinctive ethnic unit, (however, the first time this happened was during the census of 2002), in Estonia the Setus are considered just as an ethnographic group of Estonians. The Izhma Komi people are traditionally considered to be an ethnographic group of Komis, although a very specific one. Gaining the status of a separate ethnic group may allow them to get benefits meant for the small peoples of the North in Russia. But this separation can also lead to a question about the status of other ethnographic groups of the Komi people. The Pomors have been usually treated as the Northern Russians of the Arkhangelsk region. However, the ethnic mobilization of the Pomors somewhat contests the idea concerning the Russian nation in general (as, for example, the Chuvans in Chukotka – see, e.g., Vakhtin 2002). All ethnic groups we investigated are aboriginal inhabitants in their areas but in the contemporary situation prob-

lems concerning their specific status have became a topic of administrative management and scholarly discussions.

Detailed comparative study of the named groups, in similar parameters and within a single program, allowed us not only to analyze the ethno-cultural and ethno-political processes in local communities, but also to build the models for designing and re-designing the local identities, to define insofar how real these communities are at present and what is the role of ethnic activists in designing them. By way of our project we attempted to develop a more balanced, pluralistic and integrated view regarding the identity of the Setus, Izhma Komis, Pomors and Ingrian Finns. This was supposed to be achieved by applying different research methods, supported by the pluralistic background of research traditions of project participants.

A novel approach to the identity of different ethnic groups was planned to be developed by implementing a flexible model of identity. In general, earlier studies have concentrated on the description and interpretation of determinants, some core values or key symbols of the culture and identity of different groups (see Mauss 2000 [1938]; Benedict 1947; Mead 1963; Sapir 1993). Our basic idea was that identity does not solely depend on a set of stable elements that are anchored in the "core" of culture; instead, the identity of people is more flexible and continually changing due to unstable political, social and ideological environments and the inner development of local communities (Turner 2006; Bazin & Selim 2006; Bennett 2007). We followed the ideas drawn from recent theories that interpret identity as discourse (Bhabha 2000; Chun 2005; Doja 2006; Gannon 2006), plastic, variable, complex, reflexive (Cohen 1994; Ortner 2005; Luhrmann 2006), multi-local, contemporary (Marcus 1998; Portis-Winner 2002), close to the native point of view (Geertz 2001 [1973]; Marcus & Fischer 1999) and subjective (Derrida 2000). Identity functions on many levels: identities can be seen as processes that "weave together" multiple elements such as "fragments of discourses and images, spaces and times, things and people" (Edensor 2002: 29–30).

We also tried to build our approach on balanced application of theories about ethnicity and nationalism. Our hypothesis was that current rise of local ethnic identity, or the strengthening of ethnic ties inside the groups under investigation, is felt by some members of these groups as natural. Still, we can also possibly come across opinions that support 'instrumental' or 'constructivist' interpretation, applied to the process of intensification of ethnic feelings (about 'primordialist' and 'instrumentalist' dispute, see, e.g., Özkirimli 2000; Smith 2002). Our approach was somehow more close to ethno-symbolic theories, as

we see that there is some natural ground for the rise of local identities but that constructed issues are also present. So we can interpret ethnicity as a kind of discourse (cf. Brubaker 1996; Calhoun 1997; Özkirimli 2000). We planned to apply discourse analysis of ethnicity on multiple levels – with regard to public texts (political statements, newspaper articles, research papers of ethnologists, sociologists, historians etc.) and grass-root understandings of current processes of ethnic mobilization and fragmentation by the local people. At the same time, we tried to remain aware of reflexive issues and firmly positioned ourselves in the context of these different discourses.

Ethnologists, folklorists and sociologists were involved in this interdisciplinary project, allowing us to apply quantitative and qualitative research methods and to approach more general, comparable trends in different groups' identity changes (sociological inquires) as well as to search for particularities of ethnic ideas on the most intimate level (ethnology and folkloristics) of the communities under investigation.

Scientific objectives of the project were established within a broad range of possible research areas. All research teams shared three main topics that were placed on the agenda of our joint study program. Firstly, this general frame included the estimation of the role of political institutions and leaders, analysis of the programs and ideologies of ethnic organizations, efficiency of political representation of a group at local and regional levels. Secondly, we aimed at studying the national and regional authorities' attitude towards the group, and analyzing the relations inside the group. Thirdly, our task was to develop an analysis of different ideologies that influence the processes of actualization or de-actualization of local ethnic identities.

The project concerned problems that are important for understanding the post-Soviet ethnic and social developments in Eastern Europe and Russia. These small ethnic groups (Izhma Komis, Pomors, Setus and Ingrian Finns) have existed for a long period of time. Yet in the contemporary situation, essential issues of their ethnicity and a possible degree of sovereignty have became a topic of discussion among these groups themselves as well as among politicians, scientists and the dominant ethnic groups (Komis, Russians, Estonians, Finns). Pursuant to the research program of our project, we attempted to analyze different aspects of growing ethnicity of the small ethnic groups from multiple perspectives. This new, comparative analysis attempted to give some novel insights into the process of ethnic fragmentation in given areas.

Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that anthropology must change its very essence and recognize that societies cannot be approached just as *objects of study* that must be saved as they are, for the sake of scholars. Nowadays, these commu-

nities have become *collective subjects* with certain demands for a right to change. (Lévi-Strauss 1999: 99)

During recent decades anthropologists and ethnologists have attempted bridging the opposition between academic interests and politics, between the experience of scholarly activities and practical applications of research results, between interests of local communities and positions of political figures. Our research is an additional effort to overcome these mentioned challenges.

Our project members concentrated their attention on different complicated problems, related to re-identification and construction of ethnicity, to the study of actual interests of local groups.

In a contemporary world, in the context of globalization, competition becomes sharper between economic subjects and cultural groups that experience complicated political and social processes, varying value systems, and changing general image of different regions. Local groups envision their resources for further development in the actualization of their specific cultural features and re-conceptualization of historical roots. These processes result, firstly, in movement towards regionalism, and secondly, in intensive construction of new ethnic identities.

Obviously, each particular case, related to processes of re-identification and construction of ethnicity, needed a specific approach. Issues that influence these processes are activated differently in every single situation, yet at the same time, described circumstances do not exclude the necessity to search for a general interpretation frame enabling us to detect purposes for refusing the integration to dominate societies by local groups. It was also important to attempt to analyze motifs of increasing traditionalism, a tendency to draw more definite cultural boundaries between different ethnic groups.

In the course of the project, we studied several ethnic communities, in post-Soviet space, that have gained more scholarly and public interest during recent decades. This increasing attention is caused by the fact that these groups, with shifting identity, constitute a particularly interesting study object for anthropologists. However, we must also consider the issue that these ethnic units are undergoing a process of active search for, and re-conceptualization of their identities. A characteristic feature of these developments is also the certain ethnic lobbying that is carried on by the most active representatives of these groups with increasing ethnic consciousness. For that reason we considered that it is necessary that the problems concerning these groups must be studied in cooperation with scholars and representatives of these communities.

Our academic interests were related to the problematics of studies in ethnic identity within the dynamically changing cultural and social environment

in post-Soviet Russia and Estonia. Our dialogue partners, representatives of these local communities, were interested in the realization and recognition of their right to ethnic differentiation. In our research we tried to approach both positions and obtain a more general view of the anthropology of local groups. Our research ideology can be characterized by Frederic Barth's remark about an anthropological discourse which emphasizes a synthetic approach that connects situation-specific empirical facts and theoretical views (Barth 2006: 10).

The general analytical scheme of our joint research can be conceptualized through the analytical logic of discourse, proposed by Norman Fairclough (2003), his model of discourse analysis is based on three major components: processes, participants and circumstances.

This project served as a basis for developing a theoretical framework for the group of Estonian ethnologists who continued studies of regional identities at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory and by the Estonian Science Foundation grant "Religious Change in Post-colonial World".

NOTE

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