

## SCTCMG 2019

### International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of Modern Globalism»

#### INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ETHNICITY IN REGIONAL IDENTITY: MODEL OF REPUBLIC OF ALTAI

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#### *Abstract*

The study discusses the inclusion of ethnicity in the regional identity of the Republic of Altai. Regional identity is considered as an idea about a region and its image and a collective awareness of the characteristics of this region. Regional awareness and the image of the region, expressed, in particular, in its territorial brand are defined as the key components of the regional identity. Discursive analysis was used as the main research method. Presentation materials and videos, landmarks of the Altai Republic, regional narratives and myths were used for research. Methods of expert interview, analysis of regulatory documents and field research materials in the Altai Republic were analyzed. The study describe main geographical features of the region that affect the regional identity, ethnic characteristics of the titular ethnic group, politization of ethnicity and ethnicity branding. It is highlighted that an important aspect of constructing the region identity is the image of the “other”, which the Altai Territory is. The key formula of the republic's regional identity is the Gorny Altai brand. The connection of ethnic and territorial bases in the regional identity of the Altai Republic is revealed through the model of "civil-territorial identity", which includes ethnic markers. For the selected model, it is characteristic that the territorial identity is not directly connected with the ethnic identity but is used for consolidating the community. Various ethnic groups are integrated into a single region – a community through territoriality, that emphasizes the civilian nature of the territorial community.

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**Keywords:** Regional identity, ethnicity, brand, Republic, Altai.



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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, searching for resources of regional identity is required for any regions of the world, as it helps to solve the problems of the region awareness and strengthen its position in the networks of interactions at the national and international levels. Positioning through branding in these conditions becomes one of the key tools by which reality is constructed, values are created and behavior patterns are determined. The cosmopolitan diffusion of such practices is associated with a worldwide trend: awareness of the economic effect arising from the proper use of such tools capabilities.

Creating a regional image is considered in science literature in the context of the idea of institutionalizing a region, in which the identity and image of a region are thought of as conceptually intertwined concepts both at the level of theory and in daily practice of regional development that emphasizes the competitiveness of the territory (Zimmerbauer, 2011). Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013) implicated regional identity as an emotional phenomenon associated with regional consciousness, on the basis of which belongingness as well as social groups difference occur. Hence, regional identity consists of two separate, intertwined components: regional self-awareness and region identity (image). These components are interrelated: regional identity is a prerequisite for successfully creating a territory image, as well as designed images transform the idea of a territory uniqueness.

Regional identity, presented as an idea of a region and its image, as well as a collective awareness of this region (i.e. a set of experiences, feelings and visions shared by the regional community) influences the development of society (Šifta & Chromý, 2017). It is connected with the will of people to achieve a common goal, increases their personal activity and influence through this regional development and planning (Raagmaa, 2002). Strengthening regional identity enhances competitiveness and the commercialization of the identity (Sedlacek, Kurka, & Maier 2009; Syssner, 2009).

Constant symbolic transformation is necessary for development of the region. Promotion, branding and marketing can influence on the image of a region. Population can identify themselves with a representation of the region (Semian & Chromý, 2014). This study treats branding as the process of developing and promoting a regional brand, which, in turn, is considered as a reflection of the place identity in its image. The issue is here not about the visual content (brand logo), but about the philosophy and ideas for solidating community and determining its identity (Andersson, 2014; Anholt, 2006, 2008; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). Thus, regional identity is rooted in symbolic politics and branding.

## 2. Problem Statement

Despite the indisputable practical effect that the tools of symbolic positioning can give, scientific understanding of these processes is carried out mainly in the language of marketing and PR, which often leads to conflicting situations when the population does not accept the proposed markers and identifiers (brands, symbols) of a regional specialness. According to the world experience of creating a favorable symbolic space in the regions, the key to institutionalizing product of the following a policy is supported by the historical and cultural foundation of the place or regional identity in which the policy is put forward. In many territories of Russia, the positioning policy and the processes of place marketing accompanying it contradict the cultural heritage of the society. At the regional level, there focuses of conflicts arise from the

implementation of symbolic positioning practices. Pursuing policies often contradict the values and meanings established in the regions and formed the basis of the peculiarities of regional community identity.

### **3. Research Questions**

From this point of view, the problematic is important for national regions, where ethnicity becomes an important component of regional self-awareness and the construction of an external image. At the center of the definition of ethnicity is ethnic identity based on the definition of “we” and “they,” that is, it is associated with defining oneself in certain categories and relationships with others (French, Coleman, & DiLorenzo, 2013). Ethnic coloring is considered as a competitive advantage, which allows to get additional benefits, for example, by developing a tourism cluster (ethno-tourism), bond with foreign countries, receive additional funds from the federal center to maintain interethnic harmony with the republics, etc. These practices are institutionalized in regional policy, they allow to strengthen the capital of the place and its attractiveness from the outside (Nazukina, 2018). In all republics, the titular ethnos and the phenomena associated with it become the most important attributes of regional identity. However, at the same time, the severity of the ethnic component in the internal regional discourse and image design can be carried out in different scenarios in which ethnicity can dominate, can be included in the regional image and identity as their important component can be leveled by other features.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this research is to characterize the main peculiarities of ethnicity institutionalization in regional identity. The analysis of regional identity specifics illustrates the incorporation of its ethnicity in the Republic of Altai. This region was chosen for studying due to the fact that it is unique in branding practices, has prominent regional specifics (Gorny Altai) and a registered regional brand.

### **5. Research Methods**

We used discursive analysis (analysis of the functionality and significance of the reproducing "ideas" and symbolic meanings in the political process) as the main research method. Discourse analysis gives opportunity to identify specific mechanisms which produce social and other conditionality of the text. When referring to discourse, we analyzed both “utterances” with a certain significance for a particular community and methods of their construction and representation in texts, where the settings of a group are contained in a discursive field. The study was based on the postmodern approach to discourse within the framework of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe model (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The main purpose of using this method is to outline the processes of structuring social reality, during which certain signs are assigned to certain meanings. Presentation materials and videos, “landmarks” of the Altai Republic, regional narratives and myths were the resources for this research. In addition, methods of expert interviews, analysis of regulatory documents and field research materials in the Altai Republic were used as well.

## 6. Findings

Based on the analysis of the sources we can distinguish the following characteristics of the regional identity of the Altai Republic.

**The natural and geographical features** of the location of the Republic of Altai determine the specificity of the society's attitude to the territorial uniqueness. The Altai Republic is located in the south of West Siberia and is characterized as "wildlife sanctuary", "unspoilt nature", "Russian Tibet". It is no coincidence that the "Strategy of the social and economic development of the Republic of Altai up to 2028" gives great importance to tourist-recreational potential for improving region competitiveness.

**Competition with the Altai Territory (krai).** The second important feature is the historical interconnection of two territories, which have the same name: the Altai Territory and the Altai Republic. Until 1991, the Altai Republic was an autonomous region within the Altai Territory, and then it received the status of the Altai Republic - a subject of the Russian Federation. It is notable that an important aspect of constructing the identity of a region is the image of the "other" Altai, which is the Altai Territory. The topic of joining these regions rises from time to time. The regional community and the elites react negatively to this actions, and there is practically no local politicians and officials who support the idea of the union.: "The Territory (Krai) robbed us, we did not develop" (Interview with expert 2, Gorno-Altai, August 26, 2015. Author's archive). In 2005 the celebration of the 250th anniversary of becoming the Altai people the part of Russia illustrated the situation, as the topic of unification was voiced again by Alexander Nazarchuk, a chairman of the Altai Territory Council of People's Deputies, when he stated about the necessity to unite the Altai Territory and the Republic of Altai. That was perceived as an "offence", and the fact that was happened on the eve of the anniversary celebration gave particular acute.

**Ethnicity and mental features of the titular ethnoses.** During the last census of the population in the Republic of Altai, the ethnic structure of the population has the following arrangement: Russians - 114,802 (56.6%) Altaians - 68,814 (33.9%). Altaians are considered to be a generalized ethnonym for a whole group of ethnic groups living in the Republic (Teleuts, Telengits (Teles), Kumandins and Tubalars). The very origin of the name of an ethnic group is directly related to the geography of the region, which reflects that it is a "Mountainous country". The Altaians are divided into the Northern (the Chelkans, the Kumandy, the Tubalars) and Southern (the Altai-Kiji, the Telengits and the Teleuts). The current ethnic situation in the Altai group is characterized by striving of the "Northern" Altai groups to separate from the "Southern" ones. In the difficult socio-economic conditions, the Teleuts, the Kumandins and the Chelkans have the opportunity to enter the Unified List of Indigenous Minorities of Russia and receive federal assistance (Interview with Expert 4, Gorno-Altai, August 26, 2015)

Animism is characteristic for the worldview of the indigenous people of Altai, as well as for many ancient peoples as "...the nature is not only aesthetic, but also traditional spiritual value for the peoples of Altai" (Lamazhaa, 2013, para. 11). As an echo of this view, the opinion is popular among tourists about special "energy" of Altai and the necessity of honoring certain natural places. According to the researchers the peculiarities of the Altai mentality are well expressed in the Altai literature. Here are the epithets, definitions emphasizing the unity of the Earth and the Heaven for solving the most complex and urgent, fateful problems of human existence and the entire universe. In addition, the Altaians are particularly proud of belonging to their subethnos, family (seok), and small motherland. A man of no a family is like a tree

without a root. Family line defines the originality of the Altai people as this is our past, present and future. According to Lamazhaa (2013), the second component of the Altai mentality is the space, territory, terrain, native land, and small motherland. The ancestral mountains and trees are of great importance for the local population.

**Religion.** Shamanism is considered the traditional religion of the Altaians. Religious beliefs of the Altaians were affected by Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Buddhism (Lamaism). At the beginning of the XX century. in the Gorny (Mountain) Altai, a new religious ideology “White Faith” - Burkhanism - flourished. It was based on the elements of the historical myths of the Altai people. It is noted that in 1904 the national religion of Burkhanism originated in the Tereng Valley. Based on studying the available historical materials, scientists concluded that the “white faith” is a religious system that seamlessly incorporates the traditions of Central Asian Buddhism, the ancient Turkic “Tengrian” and shamanistic rites and cults. According to some experts, “white faith is a factor of separation among Altaians.” However, in general, the coexistence of different religions is assessed positively: “Stability are managed to maintain through special relations that have been established here historically. All three world religions have to exist side by side and got along” (Interview with an expert 1. Gorno-Altai, 08/25/2015. Author’s archive). Thus, a synthesis of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Buddhist, Muslim and pagan religious and cultural traditions has been constructed in the Gorny (Mountain) Altai for a long time.

**Traditions of interethnic relations and politization of ethnicity.** Researchers describe interethnic relations in the republic as calm (data from expert interviews, Gorno-Altai, August 25-26, 2015, the author's archive). The key “stress points” of interethnic relations in the republic are noted: the presence of nomination to managerial and prestigious positions based on ethnic grounds; the absence or insufficient participation of their representatives in the work of local authorities; display of the installation to work in a team consisting mainly of people of their nationality; readiness to participate in the conflict on the side of their national group and others.

Russians in the Altai Republic steadily occupy the position of high-ranking officials, while representatives of the “titular” nation sustainably occupy “secondary” positions (chairman of the parliament) (Panov, 2016). These days, the head of the region is A.V. Berdnikov - Russian, and in the State Assembly, that is El Kurultai of the Altai Republic, the titular group has almost equal representation of the Russians: 20 Russians, and 15 Altaians from 41 deputies (based on the biographical information presented at National Assembly - El Kurultai website of the Altai Republic). The Chairman of the State Assembly-El Kurultay of the Altai Republic is V.N. Tyulentin (Altai).

Due to the importance of tribal identity, the Altai ethnic elites have always been separated. Historically, the organizational representation of the Altai ethnic elites was the Kurultay of the Altai people. But one year there was a split in the organization due to contradictions around the person of El Bashchi. There are two alternative and conflicting kurultais in the republic: the “official” Kurultay of the Altai people and the “Altai kalyktyyn Kurultay” (it is the translation of “the Kurultai of the Altai people” into the Altai language). The story of two Kurultais coexistence started in 2011 with the split of the authoritative social movement “Kurultay of the Altai People”. There is not a unity even among the representatives of the indigenous peoples in the republic. A few years ago, there were three associations in the region claiming the status of an association of indigenous peoples.

Thus, the ethnopolitical situation in the Republic is complicated by intra-elite contradictions. In this sense, territorial identity is of great importance for consolidation of the community. In addition to the ethnic factor that strengthens the significance of the regional self-awareness, the natural and geographical positions of the Republic become important for constructing regional selfness. This is a region of unique protected nature and has a considerable tourist capital.

**Synthesis of geography and ethnicity.** The ethnic component and natural and geographical features are combined in a special view about space. The slogan “Altai is the heart of Eurasia” has formulated in the region, since it is believed that the Turkic world originated in the Altai land. It is alleged that the first Turkic Kaganate was formed on the territory of Altai - a multinational state that emerged in 552 and had a positive impact on the nation building of many peoples of Asia and Eastern Europe. Another formula reflecting the uniqueness of the region is the image of "Altai as the center of the earth".

The most significant dates of the national holidays in this region are connected with the ethnicity (Law of the Republic of Altai of April 24, 2003 N 11-11 “About holidays and memorable days, anniversaries in the Republic of Altai”). For example, the holiday El-Oyyn (Nationwide Games) Illustrates this, as it is the national Altai sports festival with the participation of all the peoples of the Altai Republic and folk groups; Tyuryuk-Bayram - the holiday of cedar; Chaga-Bairam - Altai New Year. In the pantheon of national heroes, a figure of the Altai artist Gregory Choros-Gurkin is of great importance.

The Republic has its own trademark “Gorny Altai” which is officially patented by the Federal Service for Intellectual Property, Patents and Trademarks. It is its regional brand "Gorny Altai" (Order of the Ministry of Economic Development and Tourism of the Republic of Altai dated August 4, 2017 N 187-OD “On the Use of a Regional Brand (trademark, service mark). It was chosen by the competitive procedures in 2009 and represents the ethnic and territorial balance in semantic content: “The sign reflects the traditional form of dwellings of the ancient Altaians - ail with an open entrance, which symbolizes the hospitality of the Gorny Altai people, the mountainous terrain and the highest mountain of Siberia - Belukha. White and blue stripes on the trademark correspond to the colors of the Altai Republic flag. Blue stripe means the infinity of the Universe, peace, wellbeing, clear sky, mountains, rivers and lakes of the republic. The white stripe represents eternity, revivalism, love, harmony of the Gorny Altai people”.

## 7. Conclusion

Correlating the connection of ethnic and territorial bases in the regional identity of the Republic of Altai, one can say that for this region there is a “civil-territorial identity” character, which includes ethnic markers. For such model, it turns out that territorial identity is not directly associated with ethnic identity, but is used for the purpose of community cohesion, and through territoriality various ethnic groups are integrated into a single region - a community that emphasizes the civil nature of the territorial community. Here a significance is attached to the formation of a common, over-ethnic regional identity - Altai. In the Republic of Altai, ethnicity is comprehended by the regional community in relation to the natural-geographical foundation of identity by formulating the concept of “Gorny (Mountain) Altai”.

## Acknowledgments

The reported study was funded by RFBR according to the research project № 19-011-00810.

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