

Ethnicization of Nostalgia: Mechanisms and Factors of Strong Ethnic Identity in Bashkortostan

Evgeni A. Varshaver — Ph.D. in Sociology, Head of the Group for Migration and Ethnicity Research,
Moscow, Russian Federation.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5901-8470>. E-mail: varshavere@gmail.com

Evgeni A. Varshaver – Ph.D. in sociology, head of the Group for Migration and Ethnicity Research,
Moscow, Russian Federation.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5901-8470>. E-mail: varshavere@gmail.com

Abstract: This article presents the results of an empirical project devoted to the mechanisms and factors through which strong ethnic identity develops in Bashkortostan. Bashkirs, Tatars, and Russians are represented in the region in comparable proportions, yet state symbolism and nationalities policy refer primarily to attributes associated with the category “Bashkir.” The study shows that, contrary to the best-known models, experiences of discrimination play a relatively limited independent role in the development of strong ethnic identity, whereas the presence of a significant other, a turning point in one’s biography, and professional activity related to ethnicity emerge as more consequential factors. The central finding is the mechanism of the “ethnicization of nostalgia”: when people move from rural areas to a city, they begin to miss their native places, relatives, and ways of life; because the symbolic repertoires of nationalities policy mark these elements as “Bashkir” or “Tatar,” and urban events reinforce such marking, nostalgia acquires an ethnic frame. These factors and mechanisms were first identified inductively in a series of interviews (N = 73) conducted in different parts of the republic and then received quantitative support in an online survey (N = 1,107). The findings refine explanations of the strong bond between an individual and an ethnic category and propose a model that can be tested in other social contexts.

Keywords: ethnicity, identity, Bashkortostan, nostalgia, ethnicization

Acknowledgments: The author thanks the members of the Group for Migration and Ethnicity Research who participated in collecting and analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data: N. S. Ivanova, T. D. Egorova, A. A. Orlov, K. D. Eskin, and S. K. Aitzhanov.

Introduction

How does it happen that, for some people, their nominal ethnic affiliation means a great deal and they consciously or unconsciously draw on it and its meanings when making important decisions and organizing their lives, whereas for others it remains merely nominal and has no effect on their lives? A number of theories and models, developed primarily in psychology, offer partial answers to these questions. The best known among them is the so-called “stages” tradition of ethnic identity, associated above all with the work of the American psychologist Jean Phinney (Phinney, 1989). Adapting Marcia’s more general model (Marcia, 1980), which in turn interprets Erikson’s classic work (Erikson, 1968), Phinney proposes three stages in the development of a stable identity. At the first stage, identity may be irrelevant (diffuse) or unreflectively adopted (foreclosure); this is

followed by “search,” and then by “commitment.” The same tradition can also be said to include the “Negrescence” model of the American psychologist William Cross (Cross et al., 1991), who posed a somewhat different question: how do Black people who passively endure a derogatory discourse about them produced by whites (Negro discourse) become “connected” to an alternative, emancipatory discourse (Black discourse)? Unlike Marcia and Phinney, who say little about what might trigger the beginning of the “chain,” Cross usually identifies the trigger as the experience of a personal or public event of injustice toward Black people.

Another, more recent model emerged in the 2000s “in response” to the September 11, 2001 attack on New York. It is known as identity fusion theory (Swann et al., 2012). It concerns a stable state in which personal and group identities become difficult to distinguish. In its classical form, this state is measured in a particularly illustrative way, through an identity fusion task (Swann et al., 2009; Gómez et al., 2011), in which respondents are asked to select the relationship that best represents the degree of overlap between a circle denoting themselves and a circle denoting the group (or any other phenomenon external to them). At one end of the scale the circles overlap, at the other they are separated, with intermediate gradations between them. Research in this tradition is more specific about events associated with strong fusion, including negative experiences that are reflected upon as simultaneously important and collective. In a seminal study (Jong et al., 2015), the authors showed that perceiving the 2013 Boston terrorist attack as personally important was associated with stronger fusion with the categories “Boston” and “Bostonians.” This tradition also draws attention to moderating events, such as collective gatherings and similar experiences, that may contribute to stronger or more likely fusion.

By focusing on the dynamics of identification, these theories pay less attention to the triggers that set these dynamics in motion and say almost nothing about how social context makes particular triggers recurrent, thereby making situations in which the relevant chains are “launched,” and consequently strong identities emerge, reproducible. Such a description “from the side of social context” might have been the province of sociologists, yet the question has rarely been posed in these terms. Broader social-scientific narratives about “ethnic boundaries,” which originated in anthropology and were later most extensively theorized in sociology and political science, provide a language for describing the ethnic context in which individuals make identification decisions (Wimmer, 2013), but have not yet answered which particular decisions are more likely in which particular situations. In a sense, the concept of ethnic closure (Kroneberg & Wimmer, 2012) is an exception. It describes situations in which a collectivity of people, primarily by cultural means, limits its interaction with others. A classic social-scientific account of ethnic closure is Abner Cohen’s *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, in which Hausa traders from northern Nigeria formed an ethnic enclave and adopted a more “vertical” version of Islam in response to the need to preserve within their community information necessary for effective economic competition (Cohen, 2013). These works, however, provide only broad guidelines for integrating social variables into explanations of strong ethnic identity, without describing the specific mechanisms through which a nominal ethnic identity becomes, or does not become, personally stronger.

Overall, neither psychological nor sociological theories provide a complete answer to the question of why and how a nominal ethnic identity becomes personally important. Psychological theories describe general sequences or important factors and triggers, but studies that describe triggers tend not to describe psychological mechanisms or sequences, and vice versa. Sociological theories, for their part, offer a language for describing an individual’s actions within an ethnic structure, but explain only to a limited extent why those actions take precisely the forms they do.

Using material from Bashkortostan, an ethnically defined region of Russia, and tools from contemporary cognitive sociology, this article describes the mechanisms through which nominal ethnic identities, primarily Bashkir but also Tatar, become important to residents of the republic. Particular attention is given to a mechanism not previously described in the literature, which I call the “ethnicization of nostalgia.” This mechanism was first identified in qualitative research conducted in the regional capital and several districts of the republic and was then tested with quantitative data. The article first presents the theoretical framework and research methodology, then provides the broader context of ethnicity in Bashkortostan, describes this and other mechanisms identified in the qualitative study, presents calculations that give an indication of their absolute and relative relevance, and finally discusses the implications of these findings for broader studies of ethnicity.

Cognitive Sociology as a Resource for Studying the Social Contexts in Which Ethnic Identity Becomes Personally Important

Contemporary cognitive sociology, a project aimed at adapting current conventions in cognitive science concerning the nature of thought in order to make the basic sociological model of action more relevant, provides an important resource for addressing the question posed above. The point of departure is primarily the line of work stemming from Paul DiMaggio’s seminal 1997 article “Culture and Cognition” (DiMaggio, 1997). Other key authors in this line include Stephen Vaisey (Vaisey, 2009), Omar Lizardo (Lizardo, 2017), Vanina Leschziner (Leschziner & Brett, 2021), Karen Cerulo (Cerulo et al., 2021), Gabe Ignatow (Ignatow, 2007), Andrei Boutyline (Boutyline & Soter, 2021), and others, although the field is not limited to them (for more detail, see Serebrennikov & Varshaver, 2026). Cognitive sociology provides at least four useful resources for studying ethnicity and ethnic identity. The first is the concept of framing, in this case ethnic framing, also referred to here as ethnicization. Through ethnicization, certain phenomena, events, objects, or people become “linked” to an ethnic category and are thereby reinterpreted and re-evaluated. Although the implicit idea of ethnic framing is present in contemporary constructivist studies, it is rarely read specifically through a cognitive lens. The second resource consists of the ideas of the extended mind and affordances. These ideas invite us to treat phenomena and objects external to a person as part of their thinking (extended cognition), or as something that defines the boundaries of their possibilities and actively affects them. In this context, the concept of cathexis, “revived” by Dmitry Kurakin (Kurakin, 2026) from Sigmund Freud’s work, is also productive, as is the broader tradition of cultural sociology that studies contemporary rituals, including from a cognitive-sociological perspective. In ethnicity research, the closest analogue is Michael Billig’s idea of banal nationalism (Billig, 2010), which points to the fact that objects carrying national or ethnic meanings are located in space and routinely affect people, who thereby absorb these ideas. The third resource is the sociology of emotions, a field that long remained relatively marginal because of the dominance of value-semantic and logocentric models of action, but which in recent decades has increasingly entered the sociological mainstream and has been further developed in cognitive sociology, becoming a fifth “E” (emotional) alongside the 4E model of cognition (embedded, enacted, extended, embodied) (Newen et al., 2018). In social research on ethnicity, emotions likewise remain relatively marginal as a focus and a concept, although it is almost universally acknowledged that ethnicity cannot be understood without attention to this dimension. The fourth resource is the very idea of socio-cognitive explanation, which, as a disciplinary principle,

presupposes the integration of cognitive and sociological variables. This principle has only recently been stated explicitly (Serebrennikov & Varshaver, 2026) and applied to the study of ethnicity (Varshaver, 2026), yet it is central to the post-Soviet school of cognitive sociology.

These resources are used here to answer the question of which mechanisms, incorporating both cognitive and social dimensions, may reproduce strong ethnic identity. In the basic version borrowed from analytical sociology, a mechanism is a recurrent chain of lower-level events or determinations that explains the relationship between higher-level variables. In this version, the “lower level” usually refers to individuals, while the “higher level” refers to institutions; individual behavior is also implicitly constructed as rational and rests to a considerable extent on the tradition of rational-choice research. Later versions of the sociology of mechanisms no longer insist on moving down a level, on the individual as the unit of observation in explicating mechanisms, on individual rationality, or on events necessarily forming a chain. What remains is the regular co-occurrence of events and factors that connect phenomena to one another and thereby reproduce the relationship between the phenomena to be explained. The present study describes a socio-cognitive mechanism that subsequently received quantitative support and that links people, objects, emotions, situations, trajectories, and institutions. Through this mechanism, strong ethnic identity emerges among ever new individuals in Bashkortostan who are nominally, above all, Bashkir, but also Tatar.

Research Context

Bashkortostan, where the study was conducted, is a so-called national republic within the Russian Federation. National administrative units within first the RSFSR and later the Russian Federation were established by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s as part of the implementation of Soviet nationalities policy, known for that period as *korenizatsiya*, or “indigenization” (a form of affirmative action for “backward peoples”). The name of the republic is linked to the ethnic category “Bashkir.” This category, however, entered the Russian administrative framework comparatively early: those defined in this way were treated as a military estate and in return held patrimonial rights to land (Steinwedel, 2016). By the end of the nineteenth century this right had been abolished, and several decades later the category was incorporated into the Soviet ethnic nomenclature as a distinct, sufficiently numerous and “developed” people entitled to its own republic. The latter development, however, was probably more directly connected to the brief existence of an independent Bashkir republic around the turn from the 1910s to the 1920s.

Although the Bashkirs became the “titular” ethnic category, they never constituted an absolute majority in the region. At different times and according to different estimates they accounted for roughly one third of the population; the remaining two thirds consisted primarily of Russians and Tatars, along with Mari and Udmurts. Given the presence nearby of influential Tatarstan, itself a national republic, Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan, actively sought to shape the ethnic identity of the Turkic population, especially in the northwestern districts of the republic, “persuading” people that they were Bashkir rather than Tatar. This continued through much of the Soviet period and, to varying degrees, continues to the present. According to the latest census, the republic has a total population of 4,091,423, of whom 31.01% are Bashkir, 23.82% Tatar, and 36.89% Russian (author’s calculations based on Rosstat data). Until relatively recently, moreover, Bashkirs were predominantly a rural population, and even the regional capital was demographically an almost entirely Tatar-Russian city; this balance began to change after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

At present, the symbolism of the republic as a whole is organized primarily around Soviet and post-Soviet Bashkir constructs, although these symbols may also be read as “one’s own” by the Tatar population. The post-Soviet period also saw the emergence of a number of mainly Bashkir nationalist organizations. Some of their members have since moved into opposition to the contemporary republican authorities, while others have been co-opted by those authorities and participate in the implementation of regional nationalities policy. As a result, even environmental protests that are initially neutral in ethnic terms, such as protests against the development of the shikhans, chalk mountains in the south and east of the republic, become ethnicized. Symbols associated with the category “Bashkir” refer partly to nomadic life, partly to natural landscapes (mountains and steppes), and partly to historical figures, chief among them Salavat Yulaev, an associate of Yemelyan Pugachev, leader of the uprising in the second half of the eighteenth century. Contemporary Bashkir identity is also embodied in a variety of practices and objects that not only reproduce elements of late nineteenth-century rural life but also reinterpret and update the category “Bashkir” for a contemporary context.

Research Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods design. The qualitative component relied primarily on in-depth biographical interviews, using a timeline, with elements of elicitation; observations at public events were also conducted. Interviews began by reconstructing the main milestones in the informant’s biography. These milestones were marked on an A4 sheet along a timeline, a straight line representing the informant’s life course. The timeline, constructed jointly by interviewer and informant, was then used to establish more precisely the timing of events important for the interview. After the timeline was completed, the interview moved to the main part of the guide, devoted to ethnicity and ethnic identity. This section began with questions about the construction of ethnicity, including ethnic categories, stereotypes, normativity, and so on, in situations typical of the relevant periods of the informant’s life. Depending on the informant’s biography, the construction of ethnicity was explored in the family, kindergarten, the neighborhood, school, university or college, the military, work, sports, and other settings. Informants were then asked about objects and phenomena that they associated with their own and other ethnicities, and about the images and emotions that arose in connection with these objects and with their own and other ethnicities. This block also included elicitation: informants were shown objects and phenomena commonly associated with their ethnicity and were again asked to describe the feelings and images that arose, for example, when looking at a “traditional” khakal breast ornament or listening to the contemporary popular song “Khomay.”

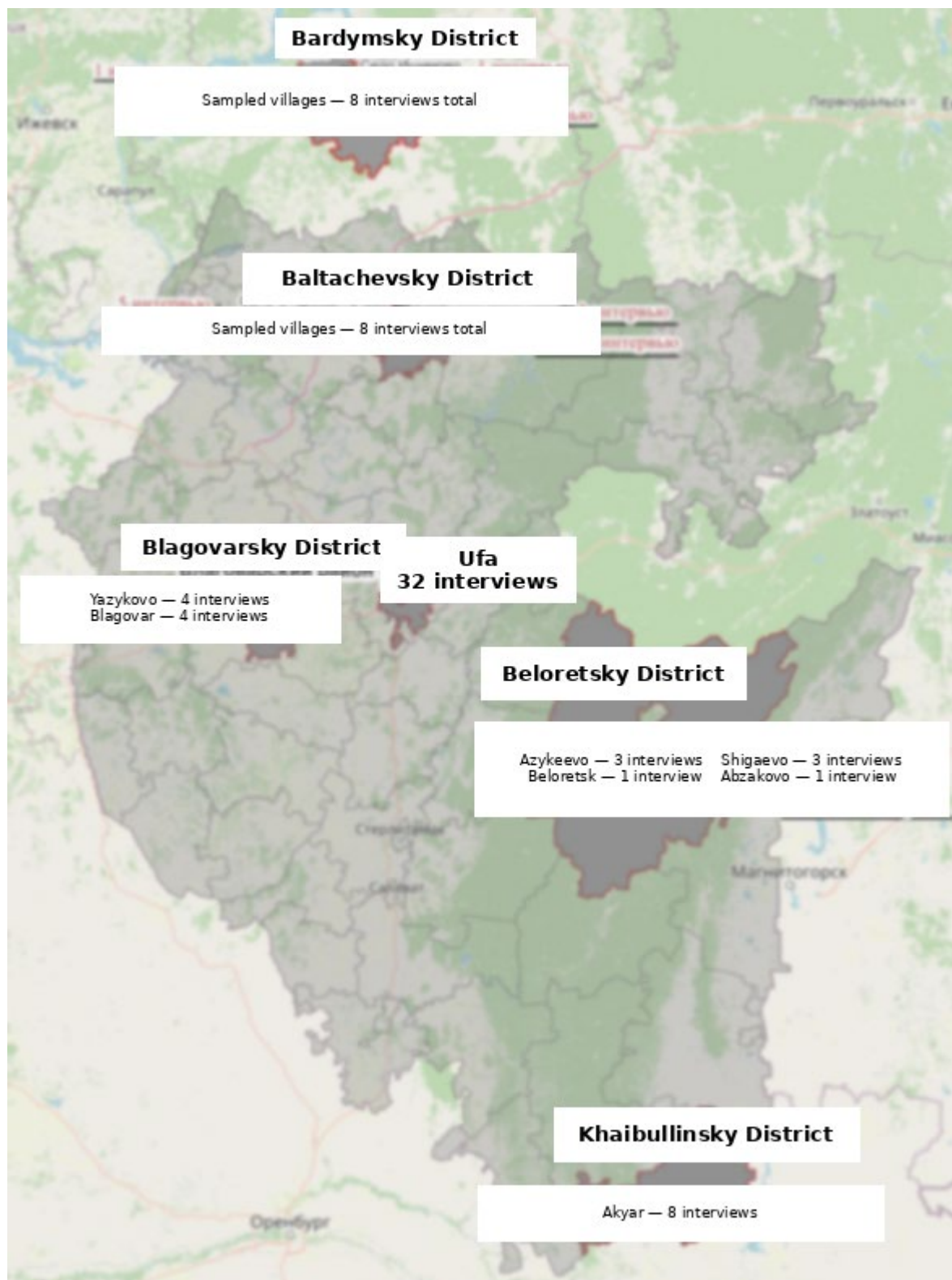


Figure 1. Geography of the qualitative study and number of interviews by location.

A total of 73 interviews were collected (see Figure 1), ranging in length from 32 to 219 minutes, with an average duration of 103 minutes. The qualitative component was divided into two stages. In the first stage, the study was conducted in Ufa. Informants were selected partly on the basis of quotas for gender, age, and nominal ethnicity, with targeted oversampling of Bashkirs; partly on the basis of A. Strauss's grounded-theory principles, whereby, beyond the quotas,

subsequent interlocutors were selected in light of questions and hypotheses that emerged during the research and discussion of field materials; and partly according to the principles of falsification and maximum variation, under which each subsequent interlocutor was chosen with the aim of refuting or complicating hypotheses formulated from previous interviews. Thirty-three interviews were collected at this first stage. During the second stage, research was conducted in districts selected purposively on the basis of previously compiled census data from multiple sources for 1926–2021 on ethnicity and native language. Forty interviews were collected at this stage, eight in each district. Within each district, informants were again selected according to age, gender, and nominal-ethnicity quotas, as well as the principles described above for Ufa.

At the first stage, informants were recruited through social networks, at public events, on casual-job websites and dating sites; one informant had participated in the research team's previous studies, and snowball sampling was also used. At the second stage, recruitment took place mainly through the administrative hierarchy. An official letter requesting informational assistance in conducting the study was sent to the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Bashkortostan. The ministry then issued instructions to the districts, after which the details of recruitment were discussed with district administration employees. Work in each district usually took two days, and across the project the pace of data collection ranged between one and two interviews per day per interviewer. There were four interviewers in total. Administrative recruitment presumably did not generate substantial bias and, although some degree of caution among informants can be assumed, the questions in the interview guide were formulated so that it was virtually impossible to determine what a "correct" answer would be. One limitation of this approach is that a substantial share of informants worked in the public sector, including administrations, libraries, hospitals, and similar institutions, but this bias was counterbalanced through the maximum-variation principle.

With informants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and initially transcribed using artificial intelligence (mymeet.ai). A casebook was then completed, an online Excel spreadsheet containing the informant's socio-demographic characteristics, biography, some technical information, and descriptions relating to key research topics. These descriptions were detailed and effectively constituted the result of substantive analysis of the interviews conducted by the interviewer after the fact, from memory and on the basis of the transcript.

Data analysis took place both during fieldwork and after its completion. Analytical meetings involving all four members of the research team were usually held after each "set" of interviews, each set likewise consisting of four interviews. At these meetings, interviewers gave oral overviews of the interviews for the other team members, structured according to the casebook sections; analytical generalizations were made and specific questions were discussed. In parallel, some interviews were analyzed in detail and in writing. After data collection was completed, a one-day analytical meeting was held at which answers to the key research questions were formulated orally. On this basis, a first draft of the analytical text was prepared and then verified by each team member in relation to their own informants. The text was revised in accordance with their comments.

The quantitative component was conducted as a cross-sectional online survey. Data were collected from January 20 to January 30, 2026, using an online interface built with the Anketolog survey platform. Respondents completed the questionnaire independently. To be included in the study, respondents had to be over 18 years old, consent to participation, and have at least two years of experience living in the Republic of Bashkortostan. Recruitment used two channels: (a) online panels and (b) open recruitment through social networks and messengers. The sample was a

convenience stream sample. After cleaning and application of quality criteria, the final dataset contained 1,107 questionnaires. The questionnaire had a modular structure and combined biographical and scale-based questions with free-association tasks and emotion ratings. Routing between modules was designed so that respondents saw only questions relevant to their residence in Bashkortostan, migration experience, and current place of residence.

The first module began by collecting demographic indicators: gender, year of birth, and level of education. These were followed by screening questions about respondents' connection to Bashkortostan: whether they currently lived in Bashkortostan, had lived there previously, or had never lived there; how long they had lived in the republic and for how many years in total; and where they had spent their childhood or most of it. These answers determined the subsequent path through questions on migration and geography. After screening, respondents moved to association tasks and emotion ratings, followed by an extended block on self-identification, language practices, the geography of childhood, and migration experience, including moves within Bashkortostan and moves out of the region where relevant. Questions on socio-economic position and brief indicators of subjective state, including anxiety and life satisfaction, followed. The questionnaire ended with an Implicit Association Test (IAT).

Before fieldwork began, the questionnaire underwent three stages of piloting aimed at checking the clarity of wording, routing logic, and overall respondent burden. At the first stage, the pilot was conducted in person: several residents of Bashkortostan completed the questionnaire in the presence of a researcher and commented on questions they found difficult, as well as on obscure terms and ambiguous formulations. At the second stage, the questionnaire was tested online with a small group of people who had experience living in Bashkortostan. Respondents completed the survey in natural conditions, primarily on smartphones, and provided detailed feedback on the instructions, the perceived speed of completing the association block, and the correct functioning of filters and branching. At the third stage, a final check was conducted with a similar audience, people currently or formerly living in Bashkortostan. Participants not only completed the questionnaire but also commented on the final version before launch. Following the piloting, the wording of individual questions was refined, instructions for the association tasks were edited, and the logic governing the display of blocks and technical questions determining subsequent questionnaire content was checked.

The questionnaire included two types of questions about nominal ethnicity: (a) an open-ended question, "What ethnicity would you indicate if a census were conducted tomorrow?", and (b) a closed choice from a list, including the option "my ethnicity is not on this list." This combination both preserved respondents' natural vocabulary for self-description and produced a comparable categorical indicator. In addition, the answer to the closed question was used as a technical routing variable: in subsequent formulations and blocks, the selected category was inserted automatically, and questions relevant to the selected group were activated or adapted, including statements about the relationship between ethnicity and the self and questions about language practices.

Strength of identification was measured through several dimensions: (1) engagement in learning about the history and traditions of one's group, the exploration component; (2) the meaningfulness and clarity of one's ethnic affiliation, the awareness/commitment component; (3) the subjective importance of ethnicity and its role in self-perception; and (4) language practice as a behavioral marker, namely the frequency of using the ethnic language where relevant. The first three blocks were adapted from the model developed by Phinney and colleagues (Roberts et al., 1999), with modifications for the Russian and Bashkortostan contexts. Language practice was

included in an author-developed formulation. In addition, identification with the nominal category of belonging was assessed using a visual measure consisting of several images showing different degrees of overlap between graphic figures labeled “Me” and “my group.” This method, known as Inclusion of Other in the Self, was developed by Aron and colleagues in the early 1990s (Aron et al., 1992) and was used in later research in the identity-fusion tradition (Swann et al., 2009). Respondents selected the option that best described their sense of closeness to and connectedness with the group. Visual measures of this kind are useful because they minimize linguistic burden and often elicit a more intuitive response than long scales while remaining readily interpretable. The different measures of identification were subsequently used on equal footing and compared across models.

A separate block focused on migration experience: moves within Bashkortostan, moves out of Bashkortostan, and/or moves into Bashkortostan, depending on the respondent’s trajectory. For each type of move, where applicable, the survey measured (1) the intensity of feelings of loneliness or being lost in the initial period after the move and (2) the objects of longing or “missing,” including family, communication in the ethnic language, nature and landscapes, and other elements. This approach made it possible to treat migration as a potential factor in the loss of one’s social and cultural environment, including the linguistic environment. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents answered questions about marital status, children, personal income, employment status, work or study, and whether their activity was connected to their ethnicity. Open-ended questions about occupation and main duties were also included. Brief indicators of subjective state consisted of (1) agreement with a statement about a tendency to feel anxious about possible dangers and (2) overall life satisfaction. Both indicators were formulated in a compact form consistent with survey practice where brevity and minimal respondent fatigue are important.

Respondents were recruited to the online survey in two main ways: (1) through online panels supplied by survey-sample providers and (2) through open recruitment on social networks and messaging platforms, using paid targeted advertising and/or posts in communities. This mixed approach was chosen to combine control over recruitment, through panels where quota and quality controls were available, with broader reach among users who did not belong to panels but were relevant in terms of geography and biographical experience, such as current residents of Bashkortostan, former residents, and people whose childhood or socialization was connected to the region.

The commercial online panels Anketolog and OnIn were used for panel recruitment. Inclusion criteria for both panels were age 18+ and membership in the target audience defined by the providers as people who “have a connection to Bashkortostan.” In addition, the questionnaire itself included a screening question about residence in Bashkortostan, whether the respondent currently lived there, had lived there previously, or had never lived there, which makes it possible to describe the actual composition of the obtained sample on this dimension in the analytical section.

Open recruitment was conducted through social networks and messaging platforms in the form of (a) targeted advertising and/or (b) posts in relevant communities. The basic logic was as follows: users were shown a short invitation to participate in an anonymous academic online survey about traditions, culture, and associations related to contemporary Bashkortostan; they then followed a link to the questionnaire and underwent the same screening as respondents recruited through panels.

Several creative concepts were used in advertising and posting materials in order to (1) avoid limiting recruitment to a single message style, (2) test a more neutral and a more “attention-grabbing” tone without changing the substantive frame of the invitation, and (3) reduce the risk of

systematic bias toward an audience responding only to a particular style of presentation. All versions retained the key elements: an indication that the study was academic, anonymity, the topic of Bashkortostan, culture, and traditions, and an explicit call to “Take the survey.”

Before indices were calculated and models estimated, the distributions of key variables were examined. Histograms were constructed, skewness and kurtosis were assessed, and Q-Q plots were also used. Formal tests of normality were treated as supplementary for large samples because of their high sensitivity to small deviations, while the choice of parametric procedures was based on a combination of visual diagnostics of the distributions and robust estimates of standard errors in regression models. For clarity, the results report both measures of central tendency and dispersion (M, SD) and 95% confidence intervals.

The analysis used both single indicators, individual questionnaire items, and composite indices representing latent constructs. Internal reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Indices were calculated as the mean or sum of items coded in the same direction, after reverse-coding negatively worded items. Indicators of subjective state, brief measures of anxiety and life satisfaction, and socio-demographic control variables, including gender, age, and education, were calculated separately and used as covariates in the regression models.

Factors and Mechanisms of Strong Identity: Results of the Qualitative Analysis

The inductive analysis of the interviews identified four biographical correlates/mechanisms of strong ethnic identity: a “significant other,” “professionalization of ethnicity,” “discrimination,” and an “age-related crisis.” The key finding, and the one most strongly represented in the qualitative data, however, was the mechanism labeled the “ethnicization of nostalgia.”

Ethnicization of Nostalgia

This mechanism consists of several components unfolding in the following sequence. A person born in a rural locality where Bashkir or Tatar was at least present, and at the extreme where the person and those around them spoke exclusively the relevant language, follows one of a number of trajectories, for example moving for study or work, and enters a Russian-speaking urban environment, typically Ufa, in which relationships are more formal, superficial, and less intimate. If the home rural locality is geographically distant enough that regular visits are difficult, a “rupture” emerges and the person begins to miss familiar people and places. In the city to which they move, certain objects, events, visual repertoires, organizations, and oral or written texts contain messages about different ethnic categories, especially Bashkirs and Tatars. These messages explain who exactly counts as Bashkir or Tatar and which behaviors, objects, and other elements of culture are associated with these ethnic categories. Among such objects and phenomena, the rural migrant unexpectedly discovers elements of the rural everyday life they miss. Gradually, their rural past and particular objects within it become ethnicized, that is, linked to the category Bashkir or Tatar. This kind of framing, in which an “ersatz” version of the object of nostalgia becomes available nearby,

is represented especially densely and vividly at urban events and in the activities of ethnic organizations, which become “points of attraction” in the city for former rural residents. Participation in these events and organizations strengthens the ethnic framing of one’s past while also creating a context for a powerful positive emotional experience produced by the overlap of joy at encountering an object of nostalgia, co-presence with people who have similar experiences, and bodily movement such as dancing. The ethnicized past becomes “coupled” with a positive, ethnicized present, and the Bashkir or Tatar component of identity consequently becomes increasingly important for former rural residents. In this way, the mechanism of the “ethnicization of nostalgia” contributes to the development of strong ethnic identity. Several examples of how this mechanism works are presented below.

I011 (F, 57) was born in a small village in Kugarchinsky District and has lived in Ufa for several decades. She was recruited at an urban festival while buying a khakal breast ornament at one of the stalls. Among other things, the object referred her back to her childhood in the village and to her relatives; she had deliberately come to the festival in order to encounter various “Bashkir” objects, including a yurt and kumis, and through them to experience positive emotions. She also sometimes visits the area around the Salavat Yulaev monument, whose landscape reminds her of her native places. Another informant, i054 (M, 21), was born in Khaibullinsky District and is now studying in Ufa. He misses his home area; when he meets people he knows from the district, he is happy to see them and enjoys speaking Bashkir with them. He also regularly goes with friends to one of Ufa’s major Bashkir events, “Samovar Dances,” which is valuable to him because it refers back to life in his native area. A third informant, i020 (F, 29), was born in a village in Baimaksky District where everyone was Bashkir, so ethnicity played no role in her life at the time. Bashkirness became important to her after she moved first to Sibai and then to Ufa. There, nostalgic for childhood, she started a blog about Bashkirs and began using it to popularize Bashkir culture online.

This mechanism has several variations. It was initially formulated on the basis of material from Ufa, and Ufa “works” in this way above all; moreover, it is most “effective” specifically for nominal Bashkirs. Yet almost any urban space can “work” in a similar way, for example Sterlitamak, Beloretsk, or Sibai, or, somewhat differently, Russian cities outside Bashkortostan, including Moscow. As noted above, the model also applies to nominal Tatars, but not to Russians. This is presumably due first of all to the fact that Russians do not have to switch languages when they move, so the past is not framed ethnically; in addition, images of Russianness are not necessarily rural and are even less likely to be associated specifically with a village in Bashkortostan. The discussion above also refers to “spatial distance,” but there are cases in which identification emerged without such distance, despite regular, sometimes shuttle-like visits to one’s home locality. It is also important that the model does not require prolonged prior residence in a Bashkir-speaking or Tatar-speaking environment: the corresponding images and longing for them may form through short-term visits or even without residence there at all. Thus, i023 (F, 28) never lived in a district outside the city and was born in Ufa, but as a child she sometimes traveled with her parents to visit relatives in villages. Through the primarily family-centered Koran Ashy gatherings, which she associates with rural life and those visits, she “enacts” her Tatariness; when she later found herself in Moscow and heard Tatar music in Gorky Park, she burst into tears of joy. Informant i070 (M, 38) was born in Beloretsk and during his school years often visited his grandparents in a village in the same district, where he was taught to herd livestock, fed “national” food, and so on. When he entered an institute in Magnitogorsk and later moved to Nefteyugansk, he began to miss the village; today he attends Tatar-Bashkir discos in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, listens to Bashkir music, including when driving to the village, and so forth. Two factors are therefore central to this

mechanism: an open emotional “window” created by longing, often itself produced by distance or “rupture,” and the framing in ethnic terms of the images that arise through that longing. The machinery of such framing is often connected partly to ethnic events and partly to ethnic symbolism embedded in the urban environment.

Significant Other, Experience of Discrimination, Age-Related Crisis, and Professionalization of Ethnicity

The qualitative material also revealed other factors in the development of strong identity. These factors are not fully mechanisms, understood as chains of events or constellations of factors, but they recur sufficiently often to warrant description below.

The “significant other” factor is widespread. Often an older family member, usually a parent or grandparent, explicitly tells the informant that they belong to a particular category, after which that belonging, along with the content associated with it, becomes important within the emotional relationship with this person. For i017 (M, 19), who lived in Mechetlinsky District, the significant other was his father. When the informant was six, his father explained to him that they were Bashkir and made him sing the song “General Shaimuratov.” The boy enjoyed doing this. As he sang, he imagined Bashkirs in “traditional” fur-trimmed hats going off to war against the backdrop of mountains, with the “gray-haired Urals” in the song “seeing them off.” When the informant was sixteen his father died, and longing for his father became an emotional “window” framed through Bashkirness, through which, among other things, identification occurred in this case. I041 (M, 51), born and living in Bardymsky District of Perm Krai, was given a history assignment in the fourth or fifth grade to reconstruct his family history and draw up a genealogy. Prompted by the assignment, he approached his grandmother, the sister of his deceased grandfather, and asked her to tell him about the family. She told him about his grandfather, who had fought in the First World War and the Civil War and later died on the fronts of the Second World War, as well as about other episodes of family history. Most importantly, she told him that they were Gainin Bashkirs and recounted a legend about the children of Ural-Batyr, Aya and Gaya. He remembered this, and from that point onward, as he put it, his ethnicity was predetermined. A significant other need not be a parent. Informant i022 (M, 22), who experienced bullying at his school in Ufa, found support at music school, where he learned to play the kurai. Because the instrument is a Bashkir symbol, he listened to stories told by his kurai teacher, who became a “guide” into the Bashkir world and instilled in him an affection for his ethnicity.

Another factor, widely discussed in classical models of identity but less common in the Bashkir material and always present “in conjunction” with other factors, is discrimination. Disdain or a direct attack on informants, interpreted by them as a consequence of their ethnicity, creates an emotional experience that “opens” the “window” into which identity can “fly.” This is reinforced by the fact that “ruralness,” which is the main line along which discrimination occurs, is transformed within the symbolism described above into “Bashkirness.” Features of speech and behavior that were negatively marked are thereby recoded as positively marked, making identification strong and durable. This occurred, for example, with informant i069 (F, 42). When she worked at a house of culture in Orenburg Oblast, where she had moved after marrying, there was an off-site event during which two colleagues, “a khokhlushka and a Russian woman,” refused to let an orchestra from Sibai into a yurt during the rain. She was deeply offended, felt that she was not at home, and the event

became a trigger for her return to Bashkortostan, where “Bashkirs are at home.” For i043 (F, 38), discrimination became the event through which she learned who she was ethnically. At her school in Kazakhstan, where she lived with her family, most pupils were Russian, and she stood out because of her name. She was teased, and when she came home she asked her parents what it all meant. They showed her her birth certificate, where it stated that they were Bashkir, and explained that she was therefore Bashkir as well.

For some informants, strong identity develops in adulthood, and the “window” may be opened by a midlife crisis or retirement. Within this mechanism, informants confront the need to reorganize the meaning of their lives, and ethnic belonging, together with what it implies, for example, “preserving culture” as a value and activity connected to it, begins to matter to them. Thus i041 (M, 51), who at the time worked in a district administration, experienced a period in 2020 when his “health broke down” and he had to spend time in hospital. Because his job was stressful, he then decided to resign and reconsider what he was doing with his life more generally. He is now a specialist at the Bashkir Historical and Cultural Center in Perm Krai and one of the key Bashkir activists in the district, although only now is he mastering much of the Bashkir cultural repertoire, learning to play musical instruments, collecting Bashkir objects, and so on. A similar mechanism of identity activation appears in the case of i031 (M, 46): when his daughter was born in 2006, he began reflecting on what he would “leave behind,” which intensified his interest in all things Tatar. He passed this interest on to his daughter, who later became a Tatar activist.

Another factor of ethnic identity is its professionalization. If a person’s professional activity is connected to the ethnic or “national” domain, and such opportunities now emerge partly through the funding of nationalities-policy events and partly through a growing fashion for Bashkir culture, they may come to value ethnic belonging within this framework. For example, i069 (F, 42), although she had always been interested primarily in dance as such, for several reasons, including accessibility and aesthetics, professionalized in Bashkir dance. As a result, she came to value Bashkir culture more broadly and wants her children to speak Bashkir. In some cases, however, it may be “just business.” Thus i057 (F, 37) sells Bashkir clothing and jewelry, which are currently fashionable, but views them exclusively through the lens of demand, without additional sentiment. Informant i071 (F, 41), who works at a house of culture, regularly organizes Bashkir events as part of her job but does not herself consider ethnicity especially important. She is married to a Russian man and identifies her sons as Russian.

Quantitative Test of the Factors and Mechanisms of Strong Identity

To what extent do the mechanisms and factors of strong ethnic identity identified in the qualitative stage of the study actually “work”? To answer this question, the analysis first included components of the main mechanism identified: use of Bashkir or Tatar in childhood, a move to Ufa or another city, experiences of loneliness or feeling lost after the move, and participation in ethnic or national events. These were combined into a cumulative index in which each component had a weight of 0.25. This index is not a direct measure of the entire “ethnicization of nostalgia” mechanism. Rather, it captures four observable biographical components identified in the qualitative part of the study and is used as an approximate operationalization of the mechanism. Second, the analysis included responses to individual questions that capture the other identity

factors: a significant other, a significant event, discrimination, and the professionalization of ethnicity.

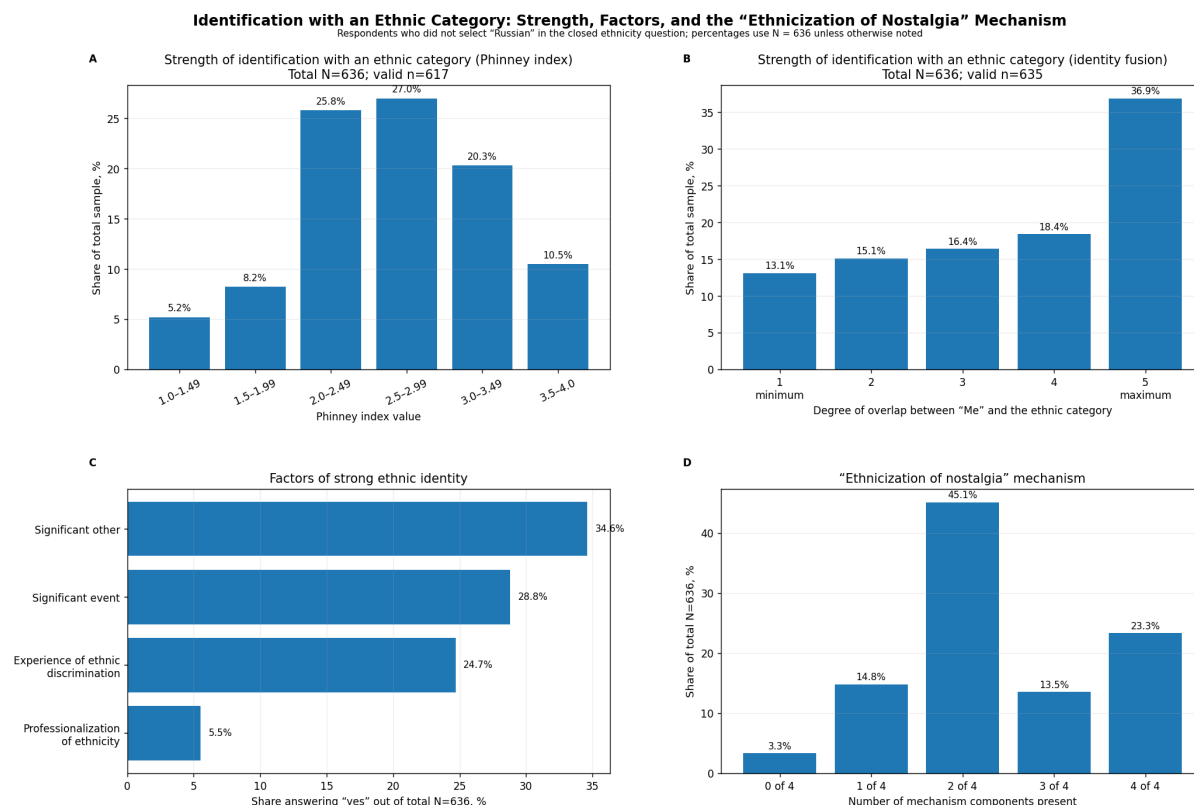


Figure 2. Distributions of measures of ethnic identity strength, related factors, and the “ethnicization of nostalgia” mechanism.

Before proceeding to regression analysis, simple distributions were examined for measures of ethnic identity strength and for the factors and mechanisms identified in the qualitative study. Calculations were conducted for respondents who did not select the category “Russian” in the closed question on ethnicity (N = 636). For comparability, all percentages in the figure are calculated from the total N = 636; valid values are available for 617 respondents on the Phinney index and for 635 on the identity-fusion measure. The distribution of the Jean Phinney identification index is shifted toward medium and relatively high values (M = 2.63; SD = 0.64 on a scale from 1 to 4). Values below 2 are observed for 13.4% of respondents, values from 2 to 2.49 for 25.8%, values from 2.5 to 2.99 for 27.0%, values from 3 to 3.49 for 20.3%, and values from 3.5 to 4 for 10.5%. Thus, more than half of the sample (57.8%) has an index value of 2.5 or above, meaning that the distribution is not concentrated in the range of weak identification. An even more pronounced shift toward strong identification is observed for the identity-fusion measure (M = 3.51; SD = 1.44 on a scale from 1 to 5). The minimum value is reported by 13.1% of respondents; 15.1% have a value of 2, 16.4% a value of 3, and 18.4% a value of 4. The largest single category is the extreme category of maximum fusion: 36.9% of respondents have a value of 5. Taken together, values of 4 and 5 account for 55.3% of the sample. In other words, both measures record a relatively widespread strong connection to the ethnic category, although the distribution of the fusion measure is much more strongly concentrated toward the upper end of the scale.

The factors and mechanisms of strong ethnic identity are not equally prevalent. Respondents most often report the presence of a “significant other,” that is, a person or people whose interaction

with them caused them to become more strongly aware of and feel their ethnicity; 34.6% of respondents report such an experience. A significant event with a similar effect is reported by 28.8%, while 24.7% report experiences of bad or prejudiced treatment connected to ethnicity. Professionalization of ethnicity is substantially less common: 5.5% of the sample report that their professional or educational activity is connected to their own ethnicity. These percentages do not form a distribution summing to 100%, since the same respondent could have several such experiences simultaneously.

Finally, the distribution of the “ethnicization of nostalgia” mechanism was examined separately. It comprises four elements: use of Bashkir or Tatar in childhood, a move to a city, an experience of loneliness or feeling lost after the move, and subsequent participation in ethnically marked events. Of the respondents, 3.3% have none of the four elements, 14.8% have one element, 45.1% have two, 13.5% have three, and 23.3% have all four. The most common pattern is therefore the presence of two elements of the mechanism, although almost a quarter of the sample displays the entire sequence. In this sense, the mechanism identified in the qualitative study is not a marginal biographical scenario observed in only a handful of informants, but a relatively widespread configuration of experience.

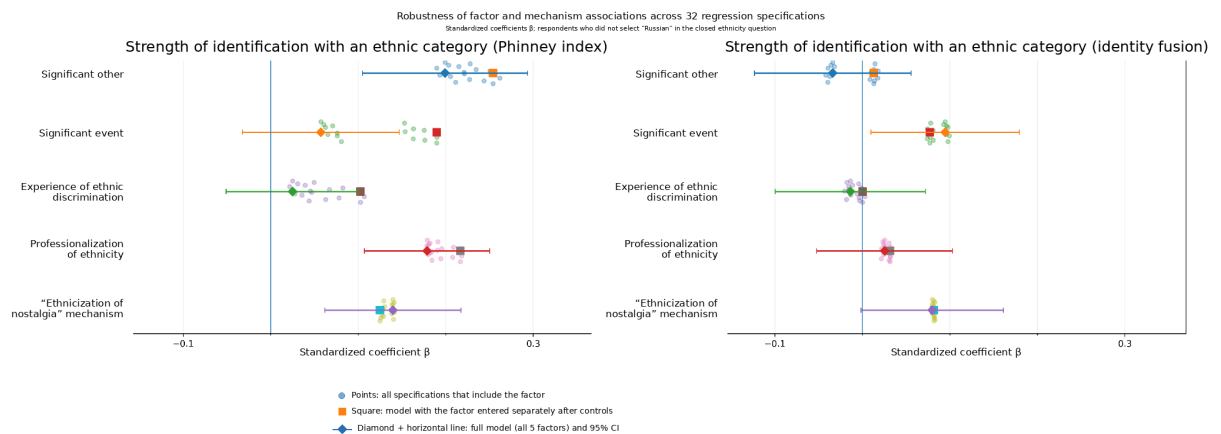


Figure 3. Associations between factors and mechanisms of strong ethnic identity and the Phinney index and fusion measure.

All variables were standardized. A series of regression models was estimated in which the dependent variables were the Jean Phinney identification index and an identification measure from the identity-fusion tradition (fusion). Control variables included age, gender, level of education, personal income, marital/partnership status, presence of children, employment, enrollment in education, and respondent ethnicity. The independent variables were the factors and mechanisms of strong ethnic identity in different combinations. Models were estimated for respondents who did not select the category “Russian” in the closed question on ethnicity.

When the Jean Phinney identification index is used as the dependent variable, the first result is that each of the five identified factors and mechanisms is, on its own, associated with the strength of ethnic identification after socio-demographic characteristics are taken into account. The strongest association is observed for the “significant other” factor ($\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.001$), followed by the professionalization of ethnicity ($\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$) and a “significant event” ($\beta = 0.190$, p

< 0.001). The ethnicization-of-nostalgia mechanism is also significant ($\beta = 0.125$, $p < 0.01$), as is experience of ethnic discrimination ($\beta = 0.103$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, at the first step none of the factors identified in the qualitative study “drops out”: each is individually associated with stronger ethnic identity.

The picture changes when all five factors and mechanisms are included in a single equation. In the full model, three remain significant. The strongest independent association is shown by the “significant other” factor ($\beta = 0.199$, $p < 0.001$), followed by the professionalization of ethnicity ($\beta = 0.179$, $p < 0.001$) and then the ethnicization-of-nostalgia mechanism ($\beta = 0.140$, $p < 0.001$). The “significant event” ($\beta = 0.057$, $p > 0.1$) and experience of discrimination ($\beta = 0.025$, $p > 0.1$) cease to be significant when the remaining factors are taken into account simultaneously. The explanatory power of the full model is $R^2 = 0.196$. In other words, discrimination is to a substantial extent “nested” within other mechanisms: what appears in separate models as an association between a significant event or discrimination and identity is, after the “significant other,” professionalization, and nostalgia are taken into account, largely “decomposed” by them.

This becomes even clearer in the reduced model, which is almost as strong as the full model in explanatory power. It contains three variables: “significant other,” professionalization of ethnicity, and ethnicization of nostalgia. All three associations remain highly significant: $\beta = 0.235$ ($p < 0.001$), $\beta = 0.184$ ($p < 0.001$), and $\beta = 0.141$ ($p < 0.001$), respectively. The model’s explanatory power differs very little from that of the full model: $R^2 = 0.193$ versus 0.196. Thus, adding “significant event” and discrimination produces almost no increase in the share of explained variance. In this sense, these three mechanisms provide the most compact description of strong ethnic identification as measured by the Phinney index.

The pattern looks somewhat different when the identity-fusion measure is used as the dependent variable. Here, not all factors are significant even in the individual models. After socio-demographic characteristics are taken into account, fusion is associated with a “significant event” ($\beta = 0.077$, $p < 0.05$) and the ethnicization-of-nostalgia mechanism ($\beta = 0.082$, $p < 0.05$). “Significant other,” discrimination, and professionalization of ethnicity have no independent association with this measure. In the full model, “significant event” remains significant ($\beta = 0.095$, $p < 0.05$), while ethnicization of nostalgia lies immediately at the conventional threshold of statistical significance ($\beta = 0.080$, $p = 0.055$). The explanatory power of this model is substantially lower than for the Phinney index, at $R^2 = 0.102$.

The reduced model for the fusion measure includes “significant event” and ethnicization of nostalgia. In this model both associations are significant: $\beta = 0.077$ ($p < 0.05$) for significant event and $\beta = 0.082$ ($p < 0.05$) for nostalgia, with $R^2 = 0.101$. Adding the other three factors contributes almost nothing to the model.

The results therefore point not so much to a single universal mechanism of strong ethnic identity as to several different mechanisms whose relevance depends on what precisely is meant by the strength of identification. The Phinney index is associated primarily with longer-term biographical and activity-based processes: the emergence of a significant other, the professionalization of ethnicity, and the ethnicization of nostalgia. Significant events and discrimination are also associated with strong identity, but these associations overlap to a considerable extent with the longer-term processes. The fusion measure, by contrast, is much more strongly associated with the event-based component and with the nostalgic mechanism. The quantitative analysis thus provides additional support for the mechanisms identified in the

qualitative part of the study and shows that they are related to different aspects of strong identification: some appear to be connected to the more durable construction of a relationship with an ethnic category, while others are connected to situational or event-conditioned convergence between that category and one's sense of self.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis therefore shows that experience of discrimination, the trigger most prominent in the literature on strong ethnic identity, does not play a central independent role in Bashkortostan. More consequential are a significant other, the professionalization of ethnicity, a significant event, and the mechanism of the "ethnicization of nostalgia." The latter is associated with both dependent variables, although for the fusion measure the result is sensitive to model specification: in the full model the association lies immediately at the conventional threshold of statistical significance ($p = 0.055$), while in the reduced model it remains significant. According to the proposed mechanism, people originating in rural areas translate their longing for native places into the language of ethnicity and receive positive emotional reinforcement at ethnically marked events; as a result, nominal Bashkir or Tatar belonging becomes emotionally and socially significant to them.

The findings complement the literature on the development of strong ethnic identity. Psychological studies, by focusing on the internal stages through which a stable identity forms, say comparatively little about the properties of the social environment that trigger this process; exceptions include research linking stronger identification to experiences of inequality interpreted in ethnic terms or to reflection on a collectively significant traumatic event (Swann et al., 2012; Cross et al., 1991). The present study, first, broadens the range of possible triggers and, second, shows how a chain leading to strong identity can incorporate internal states, biographical events, elements of the urban environment, and institutionally supported symbolic repertoires on equal terms. It thereby offers the sociological literature on constructivist approaches to ethnicity a detailed mechanistic account of how strong ethnic identity routinely develops at the intersection of structural, biographical, environmental, and psychological variables. The "ethnicization of nostalgia" mechanism may potentially apply to other contexts in which migration, rupture with a familiar environment, and readily available ethnic marking of objects from the past coincide; in other settings, the relevant set of factors and mechanisms may be different.

The quantitative component of the study has several limitations. The online sample was a convenience stream sample and is not representative of the population of Bashkortostan, so the reported percentages should be interpreted as characteristics of the sample obtained. The cross-sectional design does not allow the causal direction of the observed associations to be established. Finally, the "ethnicization of nostalgia" index captures not the mechanism itself in its full sequence but a set of its observable biographical components; the regression models were also estimated only for respondents who did not select the category "Russian." Accordingly, the quantitative analysis should be understood primarily as a test of the compatibility of the data with the proposed model rather than as causal proof of that model.

In conclusion, the common denominator of several of the identified factors appears to be an "emotional window," a state of biographical vulnerability in which new schemas of self-description

become especially relevant. In this study, such a window is created above all by nostalgia and longing after migration, but also by an age-related crisis and experiences of discrimination. This observation reconnects the proposed model to the classical line of identity research running from Erikson through Marcia to Phinney and Swann and poses a further question: what social conditions regularly create such windows, and which available categories are capable of “occupying” them?

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