How is Ethnicity Constructed in Interactions between Census Takers and Their Respondents? (Results of Observations During 2021 All-Russian Census in Dagestan)

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Abstract
Results of an anthropological study of the Russian 2021 census in Dagestan are presented in the paper. The theoretical framework of the study combines the recent constructivist glance at census as a process of ethnic diversity creation and reinforcement with anthropological tools of in-depth research of sociological survey-taking. The study was focused on the process of constructing ethnicity in interactions between census takers and respondents. The main research method was observation, besides a series of interviews with different participants of the census was held. Altogether the interactions were studied in 73 households in 5 locations in a 100-km radius from Makhachkala, the capital city of Dagestan. According to the study results, the meaning of census was unclear for most of the census participants. The census takers were irritated by the number of what they regarded as "identical questions", which were the questions about the known language aside from Russian, the native language, and the nationality (ethnicity or 'natsionalnost')[1]. It looked strange for them as they generally regarded 'ethnic' matter as unimportant. As a result, most of 'ethnic' questions were filled in by census takers on the basis of their background knowledge or the answer to only one question per household. This information, however, followed a very clear pattern, according to which the nationality of a person can only be his or her father's nationality and almost never his or her mother's, while the native language is the language of nationality regardless of a person's actual knowledge of this language. Implications of these findings for contemporary constructivist theories of ethnicity are discussed. Altogether the findings contribute to literature on the role of census in ethnic diversity construction, on the rules of participation in ethnic categories and—more broadly—on transition from pre-modern ethnic contexts to modern ones.

Keywords
ethnicity, census, Dagestan, anthropology of surveys.

Introduction

For a long time, the census was considered the most reliable "supplier" of knowledge about the structure of modern societies (Census…, 2018). In recent decades, however, this view has been revised under the influence of various, primarily sociological, traditions, and the census has come to be seen as

[1] In the 1920s the Bolsheviks introduced an official ethnic classification with 'natsionalnost' being the key term. This word in Russian has the same root as nationality in English, however it means ethnicity rather than citizenship. Here and further we'll be using the word nationality meaning 'natsionalnost'/ethnicity.

a way for countries to imagine the object of governing (Anderson, 2006), and also to be recognized more as an arena of political struggle than as an objective reality mapping tool (Kertzer, Arel, 2001; Tishkov, 2005). The latter thesis was based, among other things, on a methodological consideration, according to which data are primarily a function of the instrument, and the information received is always a kind of compromise between reality and the generalized concept of the state regarding "its" population, operationalized through census procedures. Important in this regard is what classification categories are distinguished, as well as how these categories—at the stage of collecting, analyzing and publishing data—are attributed to people and events.

In view of this aspect, categories that are called upon to describe ethnic diversity acquire a special role. This is due to the special ontological and epistemological status of ethnicity per se, which, as follows from the established constructivist consensus (Wimmer, 2013), is a highly contextual phenomenon and, being an almost universal regulator of relations between people, does this each time through a different set of historically established categories. Moreover, it is obvious that it is the census that is one of the main tools for creating an ethnic context, i.e. constructing ethnic categories and their subsequent inclusion in the administrative frame. As a result, ethnic reality then "comes to life" due to the habitualization of these categories by those who turned out to be described through them (Cohn, 1984; Hirsch, 1997).

However, while pointing out the importance of the census in constructing ethnicity, researchers — with rare exceptions (Valentine, Valentine, 1971; Filippova, Arel, Gusef, 2003; Terry et al., 2017) — did not take the obvious step forward and did not turn their attention to direct interactions, which, when scaled by census machinery, are the actual source of subsequent classifications. There is an influential tradition, according to which anthropological research has focused on interview procedures (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000), and this has demonstrated that there is a significant gap between interactions in formalized interviews and their codification. In a strange way, however, the census, one of the main sources of societal data, has generally not been the focus of such studies.

In the course of a collective anthropological project carried out during the Russian 2021 census in Dagestan, i.e. in one of the most ethnically diverse regions, an attempt was made to fill this gap and find out how, in the course of interaction between census takers and respondents, ethnic diversity is constructed. The key research method for the project was observation. Among the questions underlying the study were the following: Are survey procedures being followed, or is ethnicity imputed in different ways to the respondents? How do census takers and their respondents understand "ethnic questions",

and what census questions do the former and the latter refer to as such? Do communication breakdowns and "classification wars" occur, and how do they work? These questions, however, were of a framework nature, and the main task of the observers was to detect and record everything that seems unusual in the census procedure and differs from official procedures. Such an approach made it possible not to hold on to the predetermined theoretical framework, to pay attention to the interaction as such, and, having described and analyzed it, to give the most complete answer to the question of how ethnicity is constructed during the census. This paper presents the main results of the project, as well as some generalizations of a theoretical nature.

Literature review

Attention to the census and, more broadly, to population statistics as one of the important elements in the construction of ethnicity took shape in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The initial impetus for this kind of research was given in works devoted to colonial empires and their methods of recording and classifying the population, and in particular in Anderson's book "Imagined Communities" (Anderson, 1983), it was the census—along with the museum and the map—that was proclaimed to be one of the main tools of the imagination of the population and its components. Appadurai (1993: 318) supports this impulse in a short paper on classification systems in India, where he shows how the British "concern" with counting and categorization essentially created a caste system that became the basis for mobilization, political identity and electoral wars (Cohn, 1984). At the same time, detailed studies of racial classifications are emerging in American censuses of various years (Choldin, 1986; Lee, 1993), and, in particular, in a collection of articles on the relationship between the census and politics edited by Alonso and Starr (Alonso, Starr, 1987), Petersen (Petersen, 1987) analyzes census categories as a reflection of the social diversity concept. Since the late 1980s, research on the role of the census in the construction of ethnicity has embraced a variety of country cases (Hirschman, 1987; Urla, 1993; White, Badets, Renaud, 1993), which in 2001 makes way for a collection of articles edited by Kertzer and Arel (Kertzer, Arel, 2001). This collection was one of the first attempts to compare cases and create a generalizing narrative about the relationship between the census and ethnicity. The authors formulated a now classical thesis, according to which the census not only and not so much reflects social reality in its ethnic aspect, but rather constructs it (Kertzer, Arel, 2001: 2), and their introductory article, up to a certain point, was the most extensive canvas describing the use of ethnic categories in the censuses of different countries. In many respects, the continuation of this work was a collection of articles edited by

Simon and colleagues (Simon, Piché, Gagnon, 2015), in which the most important advancement was a series of articles on the results of a quantitative analysis of ethnic classifications of censuses in different countries. They showed that questions about broadly understood ethnicity are found in censuses in 63% of cases (Morning, 2015), and that the presence of this question is associated with a variety of factors, including the presence of "indigenous" minorities in the country or the country's participation in international initiatives for eradication of racism (Kukutai, Thompson, 2015). An important idea that advanced the field was also put forward by Rallu and colleagues (Rallu, Piché, Simon, 2006). Wondering about the general idea for including ethnic categories in the census, they come to the conclusion that, along with indicating the existence of certain "groups", such inclusion implies the activation of an implicit interpretative framework that explains various phenomena by appealing to ethnic differences. In this paper, the authors also propose a heuristic model according to which states can "count to dominate", "not count to unify and assimilate", "count or not count in the name of multiculturalism", and also "count for positive action" (elimination of discrimination). (Rallu, Piché, Simon, 2006: 536). The same classification—in a slightly different form—will be reflected in the introduction to the collection of 2015 mentioned above (Simon, Piché, Gagnon, 2015: 3). The researchers working in this framework showed particular interest in the processes that took place on the territory of the USSR. There are studies devoted to both the process of the formation of the "Soviet nationalities" institutionalized in the first Soviet censuses (Blum, Gousseff, 1997; Hirsch, 1997; Hirsch, 2004) and their post-Soviet existence (Abramson, 2004; Ferrando, 2008). This interest is shared by researchers working in Russia. Thus, in the book "Requiem for Ethnos" Tishkov (Tishkov, 2003), describes in detail the political conflicts associated with the inclusion of "ethnic" questions in the first post-Soviet census of 2002, and also in another work written in collaboration with Kisriev (Tishkov, Kisriev, 2008) he talks about how the relevant decisions were made regarding Dagestan.

Along with the formation of this research area, a direction is emerging and gaining strength in the methodology of sociological research, indicating that any research interview — be it quantitative or qualitative—is primarily a conversation, and those social facts that are postulated as the results of sociological research are, in fact, created in during such conversations. Turning to the influential tradition of conversational analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1978, Schegloff, 1987), researchers in this field have turned their attention primarily to quantitative research procedures (Houtcoop-Steenstra, 2000; Schaeffer, 2021), arguing that the methodology of formalized interviews is based on the misconception that the interview is a "robotic" exchange of questions and answers, and pointing out the

need for detailed study of how the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent takes place. The general conclusion of this tradition is that a significant part of the results of these interactions, which are later expressed in numbers, is a function not of the meaning of the conversation, but of the communicative structure of the interaction. Some adherents of this tradition, however, do not confine their attention to the conversation and point out that, although it is the conversation that is in the primary focus of analysis, the object of study is primarily "everyday common sense of the participants in survey communication" (Rogozin et al., 2016: 18). This common sense manifests itself in conversation, but is not exhausted by conversation, which means that conversion-analytical techniques are only one of the tools for its explanation along with a variety of other ethnographic methods.

The two traditions mentioned above, however, hardly intersect, and the study of the census procedure using ethnographic methods is still extremely rare. This is probably the result of a number of coinciding factors, among which are the confidentiality of census data, the time constraints of the census, the disciplinary distance between ethnographers and demographers: the latter are usually responsible, as academics, for conducting the census, but are not interested in reflecting on the data. The only national census, the ethnographic study of which has been carried out relatively regularly since the 1970s (Valentine, Valentine, 1971), is the US census. However, the main focus of such studies is the underrepresentation of certain groups, such as Native Americans (Schwede, 2008), migrants (Romero, 1992), Afro-Americans (Darden, Jones, Price, 1991) and others in the census, as well as the reasons for this underrepresentation (Terry et al., 2017). Ethnicity is thus considered exclusively through the framework of the "visibility" of certain "minorities" in state statistics. Perhaps the only work that made an ethnographic study of constructing ethnicity in the course of census interactions was the umbrella project of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of Russian Academy of Sciences (Filippova, Arel, Gusef, 2005). The authors planned to study the Russian census of 2002 in different regions by the method of observation (incl. participant observation). However, when the organizers turned to the regional statistical entities, they encountered resistance, and direct observation of the census procedures turned out to be impossible. In light of this, the essays included in the collection published as a result of the project focused primarily on the general regional contexts of the census, and the papers only sporadically present data obtained from anthropologists who participated in the census as census takers or collected during their ex-post interviews.

Thus, as far as we know, there have been no studies in the constructivist framework and, based on certain anthropological methods, no works have been focusing on the interaction between the census

taker and the census respondent in order to study the everyday construction of ethnicity in the course of the census.

Research context

Dagestan is a federal subject of Russia located in the South of the European part of the country. It combines mountainous territory in the West and plains along the Caspian Sea shore in the East. Despite its being one of the goals of Russian imperial expansion from the beginning of the 18-th century, the territory of contemporary Dagestan was fully incorporated into the Russian Empire only in the second half of the 19-th century as a result of the Caucasus war against local insurgents led by imam Shamil. The subsequent period combined integration of these territories into the imperial economic system and substantial effort of tsarist ethnographers and linguists towards their 'conceptual conquest' (Hirsch, 1997). The linguistic diversity of Dagestan impressed the scholars and gave impetus to in-depth research of local languages and culture (Perovic, 2018). The results of these studies formed the background for the Bolshevik ethnic policy in Dagestan which attempted to form 'socialist nations' based on similarity of languages and dialects (Ware, Kisriev, 2014). As for the census of 1926 the list of Dagestani nationalities was quite fractional and there were more than 30 of them, while by 1970-s this list was reduced to around 15 (The 1970 Soviet Census…). The soviet ethnic policy substantially shaped the cultural and linguistic diversity of Dagestan and, at some point, the idea of nationality became the factor of resource distribution. As a result, people, whose main social identity had been based on their village community and lineage (which overlapped to a great extent), quickly learned which nationality they belonged to. That is even though linguistic and cultural diversity within nationalities could be quite substantial. During the post-war period an informal 'ethnic balance' implying proportional representation of different nationalities in public administration (including the Communist Party authorities) and other institutions got formed. It got even stronger with the introduction of the Dagestani State Council in 1994, which consisted of 14 members, each being a 'representative' of one of the main Dagestani nationalities (Landa, 2016). The Council was revoked in 2006 within the campaign unifying Russian regional legislations. At present, there is quite a limited body of legislation which touches upon nationalities, but still they are a relevant classificatory framework for Dagestanis. People know which category they belong to, try to find out nationalities of their mundane interlocutors and believe that there is a substantial difference between nationalities (Varshaver et al., 2022). The current situation regarding the level of identification with nationalities,

however, is understudied. According to the 2010 All-Russian census in Dagestan (The national composition…), the 10 biggest nationalities of Dagestan are the following: Avars (850011), Dargins (490384), Kumyks (431736), Lezgins (385240), Laks (161276), Azerbaijanis (130919), Tabasarans (118848), Russians (104020), Chechens-Akkins (93658), Nogais (40407).

The 2021 All-Russian census was held in October and November 2021, being postponed twice due to Covid-19. This census introduced a methodological innovation, such as using tablets as the main tool of census taking. Participation in the census was voluntary. While the campaign for participation in the census was very limited, according to the official figures the census turnout was 99% (Rosstat: about 99% of Russians..., 2021). Still there is multiple evidence, that the factual turnout was much lower (Urasova, 2021; Zakharov, Churilova, 2021) and in many cases the census was a subject to forgeries and falsifications (Vishnevetskaya, 2021). The main body responsible for the census was the Russian Statistical Bureau (Rosstat), while on local level municipalities were in charge of census procedures implementation and they hired census-takers and controllers.

Research methodology

Focusing on general constructivist considerations, we placed the elementary interactions between the census taker and the respondent in the research focus, and observation became the main method of their study. Besides, in order to be able to explain why these interactions were organized in one way or another it was necessary to study the meaning of communication as it appeared to different participants in the interactions. Consequently, a semi-structured interview was used as an additional method.

The study was carried out by the author of the paper and his four students[2] with the necessary theoretical and methodological background. Several field locations were identified within a 100 km radius off Makhachkala, the capital city of Dagestan. They differed in the urbanization level of the territory, as well as in the ethnic composition of the population, as followed from the 2010 census. For privacy reasons, the locations are not disclosed here. Field work in each location was carried out as follows. First, on the basis of a preliminary agreement, a meeting was held with the census organizers, controllers and census takers in the administration building. At this meeting, they were informed about the pragmatics of the study, the procedures were described to them, and then an informal focus group was held, during which the specifics of the census in relation to a particular location were discussed (the proportion of already censused households, characteristics of interaction with the respondents, etc.),

[2] The author is grateful to A. Drozdova, A. Kunina, A. Malinovsky and V. Nazarov for participation in data collection.

then the census takers got together with the researchers in pairs (generally, one census taker and one researcher, but it was not always possible to follow this pattern) and walked through the households in the usual way — as the census takers would have done without researchers. Upon entering the household, they informed the owners that next to the census taker there came an observer, whose goal was to research the census procedure in Dagestan, and verbal permission was requested for his or her presence during the census. Every time such permission was obtained. To ensure data confidentiality, no voice recorders were used throughout the research, while the details of interactions (including dialogues between the census taker and the respondent) and the context were recorded by hand. Data on the basis of which it would be possible to identify the respondents were not recorded[3]. Between the visits to different households, researchers talked with the census takers informally, asking them why the interactions were arranged in this or that way; their attitude to the census and its "ethnic" issues was also discussed. After the working day was over, each observer wrote a diary.

A total of 5 locations were surveyed, the total number of visits to households was 73. The data were recorded in the form of field notes, after each field day they were transferred to field diaries. A total of 27 field diaries were written. Based on the results of each day, a collective analysis of the census characteristics in the corresponding location was carried out. Two major limitations of the research methodology should be noted. The first limitation was connected with the fact that the contacts with the heads of the census on the ground was established through informal channels that the researchers had already had. As a result, despite the actual presence of representatives of all nationalities in the selected settlements, the locations nevertheless turned out to be significantly shifted toward the presence of representatives of one of the Dagestan nationalities. Along with that, settlements where "classification wars" took place over the past decades were, on the contrary, not included in the research though they would have undoubtedly been an important object for observation while studying the construction of ethnicity in census interactions. The selected locations, therefore, do not claim to represent Dagestan as a whole, and it should be discussed and considered separately in each case whether the conclusions might be extrapolated to the whole republic. The second limitation is common to studies based on the observation method. External observers, non-Dagestanis, presented as "a university professor" or "students", became the context factor of interactions in one way or another; while the whole situation of the census was unusual for the respondents, the census takers (who were leading in the census dialogue) might not fully understand the goals pursued by the researchers and the presence of the latter could

[3] Thus, the requirements of 8-FL of January 21, 2002, in terms of ensuring data confidentiality were met.

significantly modify their usual behavior. Thus, it is difficult to measure the alterations that have taken place in comparison with the standard census procedure, but such biases have become the subject of regular ad hoc methodological reflection, and conclusions have been drawn from its results. Below are the results of the study: concerning the course of the census on the whole, and its "ethnic" issues in particular. Quotations and excerpts from field diaries are in italics.

Research results

(Un)meaning(ness), background knowledge, and extra Murad Magomedov

The way in which "ethnic" questions are asked and answered is largely a function of the overall census context, and more specifically of how the census is perceived by its participants. Below are some results of observations of the census as a whole.

First of all, it is important to note that the meaning of the census eluded most of its participants—respondents, census takers, controllers and heads of administrations through which the census was carried out. Respondents regularly inquired about the purpose of the census[4]. In such cases, census takers usually answered that the authorities needed the census to improve their lives ("We must say that it is to improve living conditions"; "The state counts its citizens. They want to know what they breathe, what they eat"), however, in private conversations they admitted that this mantra was used to get on with the interview, while they themselves did not understand how the data would be used either. Sometimes, however, this lack of understanding could not be hidden from the respondents, and such dialogues took place:

Respondent: *So much information is being collected, why?!*
Census taker: *I don't know, but I hope it's all for the better...*

Besides, both census takers and respondents often expressed doubt about the meaningfulness of the census in the light of the digitalization of the state, since *"the state knows everything about us anyway."* As for the local administrations, who were not obliged to regularly explain to respondents why the census was needed, they reflected on the meaning of the census to a lesser extent, often perceiving it as an imputed routine, which had to be carried out anyway.

[4] Such questions often arose at sensitive moments of the census. Strangely, questions about dwellings turned out to be the most sensitive, for census takers as well. In particular, one of the census takers was embarrassed to ask a question about the bathroom, considering it indecent.

As a possible consequence of this, field census practices varied considerably in terms of following standard procedures step-by-step and of sticking to information sufficiency norms. In one of the locations, the head of the administration said that despite the lack of census takers they managed to cope because they partly transferred information from house books to tablets, and partly they had learned to significantly reduce the time for filling out the form (both in case of a real census procedure and in case of using house books). He did not consider this to be a violation, on the contrary, he boasted that they had approached the procedures wisely (*"You need to know the system. You can record a household of 20 people in 5 minutes. One must be their own hacker"*), and regarded our visit as a kind of exchange of experience in the hope that we would suggest other ideas for speeding up the census procedure. In this location census takers developed the following rules: not to record the patronymics of the respondents, not to record the degree of relationship with the head of the household (everyone should have "another degree of relationship" to each other), not to record the day and month of birth, only the year; for questions about dwelling to record only the type of dwelling, etc.

In another location, the practice of census using notebooks was actively used, i.e. census takers put down the answers in notebooks, and then—after some time—transferred the collected data to a tablet. Interestingly, this "notebook" census was also "technologized", namely, in some notebooks, the top line on all pages except the last one was cut off, and on the last page there were key words, which were supposed to remind the census takers of the questions to be asked (e.g., "native language" or "household size"). Some census takers, however, did not use such tricks and each time restored the questionnaire from memory. Obviously, a significant amount of information was lost this way, but this was not perceived as a problem: *"Why do people need to know where you work and where your toilet is?"* Why were notebooks used instead of tablets? Census takers and supervisors indicated at least three reasons for this: poor satellite communications, the inability of older census takers to learn how to use tablets, the fear of respondents at the sight of a tablet. However, the main factor most probably was the greater control by the administration of the census process in the case of using "non-technological" methods.

In some locations, however, the census was carried out almost precisely according to the instructions—the census takers went around with tablets and asked all the questions. In such cases, it can be assumed that at least partially it was the result of field control, which—and that is quite important—was not real (there was none), but almost completely imaginary: no census takers, controllers and administrators understood what this control should and would consist of, and there were

versions that the census organizers check geolocations at the moment when the completed form was sent, and also that interviews were audio- or even video-recorded, since each tablet had a camera. As a result of all the above, census practices varied considerably from location to location and seemed to depend largely on the approach of local census officials.

The next observation is that the daily routine of the census was often perceived by its participants as strange and absurd. This is due to the fact that a significant part of the census takers in the studied locations are employees of administrations or other budgetary institutions serving the population: they are perfectly familiar with both the respondents and the location itself. Putting on a vest and a scarf with census symbols (as required) and walking along their native streets in this paraphernalia, the census takers felt unnatural, but the strangest thing for them was to ask questions, the answers to which were often well known to them—as officials or neighbors. The result of this was partly the desire to cut the procedures short, partly the transformation of the census interaction into a role-playing game.

> *The census taker <…> knows the respondents well and asks everything, even the "most idiotic" questions, including the gender. Moreover, she knows the information about this house better than the hostess, and the census sometimes turns into an exam, which is especially noticeable in the peculiarities of her intonation and the format of her questions.*

Even in such cases, however, the census takers' desire to play often faded away rather quickly (usually this happened due to the need to collect the data for rather large households asking all people the same questions), so they switched to a less energy-intensive mode of filling in the census forms. In this mode they, for the most part, stopped asking questions and filled in all the information themselves based on specific (about a person) or background (about a community) knowledge. It is important that filling in the census form "by eye" was not considered to be wrong, since the census takers, in general, were confident in the correctness of their background knowledge, and as a result in some cases their background knowledge became the primary source of information entered into the census form. In the following two situations, the censused people were not even in the room, but the census taker filled out the census forms based partly on their passport data, and partly on his ideas about his native village:

> **Census taker (completing the question on education):** *4 years of school.*
> **Observer:** *Did she tell you so?*

Census taker: *No, it came logically.*

We did not know when the mother-in-law gave birth to the first child, so as for the column for the date of birth of the first child, (the census taker) said "we'll record 1966" (the date of birth of the woman is 1946); I asked why, to which (the census taker) answered that everyone gave birth around this age here.

In most situations the respondents were present, but—aside from communication about "basic" questions—most of the census could take place in silence, or the census taker could babble or mumble questions and answers to them "under their breath". In the latter case, the respondents could "catch" incorrectly filled information, as one of the respondents actually did, when the census taker tried to enter the "Republic of Dagestan" as the place of birth. Not only was this not the case, but the census taker pronounced the answers, so the respondent heard that incorrect information was being recorded and pointed out the error. However, mistakes were not always corrected even if the census taker understood that they had made one. Here is one of the most odious examples: the census taker accidentally indicated the wrong number of household members—by one more than there actually were, and then, not being able to find a way to correct this, she "created" an additional person, a child, naming him Murad Magomedov, and completely made up his data "from scratch".

One can thus describe what happened during the census as follows. The meaning of the census eluded all its participants, it was not considered to be something important—neither for the participants themselves, nor for the state, and often, on the contrary, it was regarded as something funny and strange. One possible consequence of this was the "simplification" and "normalization" of procedures, which included filling out the census forms based on the data of house books, and the "notebook" census. Another consequence was the prevalence of census taking on the basis of "background knowledge", as well as a negligent attitude towards errors, some of which were not caught, simply because the respondents did not know what the census taker filled out for them, and some were not corrected to save time. Such was the context in which the census interactions related to ethnicity took place.

"You'll be what you've been told to be": "Ethnic" questions in the census

In different census contexts, ethnicity is "assembled" from different questions (Morning, 2015). In the census in Dagestan, these are questions about languages and nationality. The actual order of these

questions in the census form is as follows: Russian language (knowledge, use), other languages (knowledge, use), native language (must be specified), nationality.

According to the results of observations, for census takers questions about the native language, another known language (in addition to Russian) and nationality seem to overlap. Across all locations, they declared that they did not understand why all these questions were needed: *"Look, it says here 'your native language', and then they still ask about the nationality. They are the same. Therefore, these questions (bored) me…"; "So many questions just about nationality!"* In this case, questions about nationality and native language are most strongly connected: for both the takers and the respondents the native language is the language of the "nationality" to which one belongs, while the level of proficiency in it is not important: "There is a native language, it is Lezgin. It's just that (the person in question) doesn't know it, that's all." As a result, taking into account that in Dagestan the majority of population knows Russian, but does not consider it their native language, and the "native language" slot is essentially "reserved" for the language of "nationality", for census takers (in views of the "economical" mode of filling out the census form) it is enough to ask about the other known language in addition to Russian, and then both the native language and nationality are derived from the answer. For example, if the respondent says that in addition to Russian he speaks Avar, the census takers no longer see the point in asking the question about their native language and automatically record "Avar", and it is also clear to them that the nationality of this person is "Avar".

> **Census taker:** *(After asking about knowledge of the Russian language) What is your other language?*
> **Respondent:** *Avar, my own.*
> **Census taker:** *Right. (Fills in everything about nationality and native language and mumbles under her breath) Avar, Avar. (Turning to me) One can't copy this, I have to enter so much again and again!*

At the same time, apparently, for census takers, it is nationality that is the main issue of this block, so it is language that is an attribute of nationality, and not vice versa. This conclusion can be drawn on the basis of how takers first put down the data in a notebook. In most cases, they either reverse the order of the questions and put nationality first, or, for brevity, leave it the only one and don't ask questions about languages at all. In such a situation, they will then indicate the "language of

nationality" as the native language, which will also be indicated as the only language that the respondent speaks aside from Russian, and, according to the census, the respondent will also use this language in everyday life. Interestingly, exactly the same principle is used for children, including babies, and while there are options regarding the Russian language and sometimes it is indicated that the baby does not speak Russian, the language of their nationality, which is an attribute of a person from birth, is still indicated as their native language:

> *A two-month-old child was also censused, and it was recorded that he spoke Russian, used it in everyday life, in addition, he spoke Kumyk, as Kumyk was his native language, and the child's nationality was Kumyk. This happened in the first family, the same thing happened in the second one, where the girl was just a little older*.

The second observation is that, in contrast to Article 26 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which is quoted in the census form, nationality in most cases was defined without taking into consideration the self-definition of the respondents and members of their household—it was attributed to them almost automatically. Moreover, in view of the fact that classification of people by nationality was problem-free for all census participants and these questions—contrary to our expectations—did not give rise to discussions and conflicts, one could suspect a clear classifying rule that allowed to define the nationality of a person. As further observations showed, this rule really existed, moreover, it turned out to be simple and unambiguous. According to it, the nationality of a person corresponds to their father's nationality, while the nationalities of the mother and grandmothers do not play any role in defining one's nationality, just as nationality is not a matter of self-definition. This rule was derived both from the actual census forms filled out in the presence of researchers on the basis of the information received, and also from clarifications obtained in conversations with census takers, who explicitly pronounced: *"We usually take after fathers, and mothers' nationalities have nothing to do with children. Mom's nationality has nothing to do with children at all anywhere"*. In addition, this rule has options for non-obvious cases, when, for example, a child does not have a father for one reason or another: *"If the child's patronymic is not recorded, if the (mother's) parents quarreled with her husband's side, they write that the father does not exist. In this case, they give their patronymic, and in this case they themselves choose the child's nationality—according to the nationality of the mother."*

The consequence of this rule for census procedures is an even greater reduction in the number of questions actually asked, as in order to answer census questions about the languages and nationality of all household members, it is enough to ask a question about the nationality of the head of the household, and also, in the case of meticulously filling out the census form, about the nationality of the wives who may have a different nationality. However, all these questions are often reduced to one: "Are you all Lak?" If the respondent's answer is "yes", the census taker actually fills in all the four questions (including the one about the language used in everyday life) for all household members without asking.

Sometimes, however, background knowledge makes it possible not to ask even this single question. Thus, in one of the cases, the census taker who was working with a notebook, asked the nationality of an elderly woman, and the latter answered that she was "Avar", after which the census taker recorded her son as an Avar too. To our question about why she had done so, the census taker replied that she knew this village where, in the generation to which the elderly woman belonged, it was impossible to marry a person from another village, and, as a result, of a different nationality, which meant that her husband was Avar, and since nationality is passed down through the father, their son was also Avar.

It is obvious, however, that such principles are discussed and used only in those contexts where, for one reason or another, classification is difficult. In villages, where the majority of the population is of the same nationality, the corresponding questions—both for census takers and for respondents—turn out to be even more absurd and meaningless. In particular, in one of these locations, in response to the question about nationality the respondents named one of the other Dagestan nationalities, and it was evident to all participants in the interaction that this was a joke and a reaction to the role-playing game imposed on them.

> *The census taker says that some people joke… they say they know Avar language, and their nationality is Azerbaijani. The joke works because it is obvious to all the participants that everyone around is Kumyk.*

However, several failures of the described rules have also been observed. Thus, in rural locations, one of the daughters-in-law when asked a direct question about her nationality answered that she did not have one. However, it was not possible to find out the reason for her answer as the women left before the entire household was censused. Besides, apparently, the idea of self-definition, which is in this or

that way embedded in the census (in addition to indicating the corresponding article of the Constitution, the question about nationality requires to indicate whether the answer was defined by the respondent or "restored from the words" of other people) can itself set a communicative context and, to a certain extent, organize ideas about the role of choice in defining nationality. For example, two or three times, when talking with the adult members of the household and having reached the questions about the language and nationality of the child, the census takers addressed the questions directly to the child. However, it is difficult to fully understand whether this was an indicator of the gradual change in the Dagestan context in relation to the "national question" and the idea of self-definition, or whether it again was a kind of "role-playing game" described above. And if in one of the cases a child of 12 himself gave the answer that was expected of him, in another household where the child was younger, the communicative situation and the question addressed to him were used to explain to him what nationality he actually belonged to:

> **Census taker:** *What is your national language? Don't you know? Kumyk. [takes down the note and pronounces] Native language: Kumyk. What is your nationality?*
> **The child's father:** *(playfully) What nationality are you? You're Kumyk.*
> *[The boy is silent, while the census taker pays no attention to the boy's reaction to these questions and to the father's reaction, records him as Kumyk.]*

It is difficult, however, to say what would have happened if the child had given the "wrong" answer. In order to simulate this situation, in one of the households, we showed the census taker and some household members a YouTube video (I'm Russian…) in which a 4 or 5-year-old girl with "Asian" slanted eyes tries to prove to her older relative that she is not "Buryat", but "Russian", while the other, on the contrary, claims that the girl is "Buryat". The reaction of all the adults present at the demonstration of the video (though they were evidently touched) was unequivocal: "No, this cannot happen to us; here you'll be what you've been told to be."

There was, however, a more serious failure in the work of the described rule pertaining to the connection of the native language and nationality. One of the census takers said that in the course of her work she came across a family in which the father was Lezgin, the mother was Avar, and the children spent a lot of time in their mother's family and communicated with their grandmother. As a result, they did not know the Lezgin language at all, while Avar was known quite well by them. In this situation, the

census taker did not fill in the "native language" column, leaving it to the discretion of her supervisors. They, however, told her to indicate "Avar" as their mother tongue, i.e., actually referred her to the rule. Thus, it can be concluded that the rules operate quite universally, and it is hardly possible to speak of a transition to other methods of defining nationality or other concepts of the "native language" on the basis of the collected material; however, this material sets certain directions in which this can change (self-definition, actual use of a language).

The third, but not least, observation, however, is that "ethnic" questions in the census are almost never perceived to be of any significance. In none of the cases did the issue of nationality or language become a cause for a dispute between the census taker and the respondent, nor were there any verbal or non-verbal signs that these issues were important for either the former or the latter. On the contrary, the respondents "bucked up" whenever the questions reached the characteristics of housing or income—apparently, these questions seemed sensitive to them for various reasons. As for "ethnic" questions, they were filled in "on the fly" and "on sight", because—among other reasons— *"everything is clear anyway"*. Thus, one of the census takers explained that in the village where he worked, everyone was either Kumyk or Dargin, and if he addressed people in Kumyk and they didn't answer, he automatically indicated "Dargin" as the nationality of the respondent and his relatives and "Dargin" as their national language. However, in our presence his method of defining nationality failed when he started to fill in the questionnaire in an appropriate way and pronounced the alleged nationality and language of the respondent under his breath, and then decided to re-confirm (though in the affirmative form) her nationality, she objected and said that she was "Lak". In this case the census taker did correct his mistake in the form, but in a number of other interactions the nationality of the respondent and the members of his household remained unknown and was filled in on the basis of general considerations. Moreover, when, between home visits, we asked census takers questions about nationalities they were surprised at our interest in this particular topic, because for them ethnic classifications were partly understandable and "natural", partly irrelevant. The consequence of this was a typical communicative situation, in which the corresponding columns were filled in: the census taker blurts out supposedly correct answers, while the respondent half-heartedly monitors what conclusions are being made about him or her; sometimes mistakes are corrected and sometimes neglected.

A rare exception to this rule was the situation in one of the locations, in which a young census taker, contrary to what answer he was given to the corresponding question, indicated another nationality of the respondent. Moreover, he did this apparently on the basis of the pre-census instructions given by

ethnic organizations who wanted to increase the total census number of the corresponding nationality in various ways. When he was asked a direct question about why he was doing this, he said that he had been ordered to do so, but in general it did not matter at all and *"the national question is of no interest to anyone."* The information received from census takers from other villages suggests that representatives of this particular nationality were indeed, on the whole, a little more attentive to ensuring that they were censused "correctly" and, probably, the mentioned instruction was to some extent supported by the population, but it did not seem to make a significant impact on the course of the census.

We can thus point out two main results obtained from the observations of interactions around "ethnic issues". Firstly, there is a clear order that classifies people according to nationalities and attributes them a "mother tongue". Secondly, with rare exceptions these questions are obviously less important than other census questions (which, however, are not very important either) and are filled in with an underlying desire of census takers to speed up the process and not to do the senseless, in their opinion, work of filling in answers to three "identical" questions, and inattention of respondents to the "ethnicity" theme.

Discussion and Conclusions

Observing the census procedures revealed several important things. Firstly, it is the absence of a clear "external" meaning of the census procedures for most of its participants. In this regard, it can be assumed that the "good faith" of a municipality in terms of following the census procedures is a derivative of the overall bureaucratic manageability of this municipality, i.e. installation of responsible persons for positions in maximum accordance with the templates coming "from above" and the ability to organize this work. It is quite possible that one of the tools for organizing this work is, among other things, rumors about strict control over compliance with procedures. Although few people actually knew how control would be organized, and even more so, no one knew what should happen in case of violations, including mass violations, local concepts of how control is carried out were different and sometimes exotic. More important, however, is that if municipalities and certain census participants decided for this or that — often pragmatic — reason to delve into the meaning of the census, its questions often seemed incomprehensible and redundant to them, and this naturally led to a departure from the prescribed procedure regulations. Thus, various kinds of procedural deviations, e.g., filling out census forms based on information from house books, should be understood primarily not as laziness or free thinking, but as a result of getting an instruction from above to implement certain tasks, which were

not explained essentially and did not become “creatively meaningful”. The issue, however, is that, as a result, a significant part of the information that would have otherwise been collected got lost. This collision ignites further discussion of the nature of modern bureaucracies (Greber, 2016), but for practical purposes we can conclude that a significant part of the “problems” with the census arose due to the fact that the Center did not sufficiently explain its meaning to all census participants. This conclusion is consistent with what is noted in the variety of analytical materials, which followed the census (Urasova, 2021; Zakharov, Churilova, 2021)

In the case of “ethnic” questions, apparently, the crisis of the census meaning turns out to be the context for another crisis of meaning associated with the modern existence of Soviet Dagestan nationalities. In recent years, more and more contexts have appeared in Dagestan, in which national classifications are no longer significant or are even condemned, and the “revival of nationalities” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was a consequence of the impending and then the actual collapse of the Soviet Union, gives way to the their gradual decline associated with the emergence of other contexts and classifications. The irrelevantization of nationalities, however, clashes with the rigid classificatory rule, reproduced over and over again in census interactions and pronounced by census takers, according to which nationality is transmitted from father and mother’s nationality is irrelevant, while “mother tongue” is the language associated with nationality. Both elements of this rule provide much food for thought. The connection between language and nationality refers to the widely discussed “attribute problem” (Filippov, 2005), which consists in the fact that although a finite set of classifying features is used for ethnic classifications from context to context, their actual set can be very different, and besides often there is one feature that turns out to be key and definatory. For example, in Bosnia it is religion (Wiinikka-Lydon, 2013), in the USA it is skin color (Wimmer, 2013), and in Russia it is language—largely due to the fact that national policy was based on materials created back in tsarist times by ethnographers and linguists (Hirsch, 1997; Alpatov, 1997). In this respect, Dagestan turned out to be an even more special place, because in the context of actual multilingualism, usually one — and strictly defined — language was classified as “one's own", and this classification sticks regardless of the actual knowledge of this language.

However, the classification rule, according to which nationality is transmitted from father, presents more interest. The point is that the primordialist illusion of the eternity of ethnic groups is derived from the rules of belonging to categories, which, in the universal case, is related to the categories to which parents (one or both) belong (Chandra, 2006; Chandra, 2012). Due to the

universality of this rule, ethnic contexts are reproduced through generations, and representatives of the same categories can be born, live and die in a certain territory for centuries. But at some point, a general question arises about the variability of categories (i.e., for some reason the idea that A gives birth to A, and B gives birth to B is no longer viable, and categories "die out"), and there is also a separate question about new classification systems introduced outside. It is generally accepted that modernist states create the machinery for classifying the population, including ethnicity. The latter especially applies to colonial contexts (Appadurai, 1993; Anderson, 2006). The classification system introduced in Dagestan in the 1920s, using the already existing categories as "material" (Tishkov, Kisriev, 2007), reinterpreted them in the then popular "national" paradigm, put them next to each other (despite the fact that previously these categories belonged to different layers of reality), and declared the existence of "Dagestan nationalities", which earlier had not been considered as such primarily due to the lack of such an idea. And while at first the level of identification with certain categories was, as we assume, rather low, as a result of the "fifth line" (nationality) in the passport, of "national" quotas for entering universities, of the deportations on a "national" basis, etc., over time "Soviet nationalities" became an important object of identification for ordinary Dagestanis. Still, all those categories — at least in the form in which they were presented by the Soviet authorities — were new for the region, so the question is where did this strict rule to define nationality "by father" originate from in Dagestan? It seems that this rule is a projection of the rules of social classifications that already existed at that time and defined a person's belonging to certain social sets similar in a sense to "nationalities". There were some relevant classification grounds at that time in Dagestan, and among them the tukhum and jamaat played a central role. While the former term is synonymous to a clan, while the latter means 'a local community', as follows from the anthropological sources (Kosven, 1963; Khashaev, 2007), the sets described by these terms overlapped in many respects: a jamaat could consist of several tukhums, and, in turn, a new tukhum-jamaat could separate from an existing tukhum-jamaat. Tukhum was a patrilocal, patrilineal organization, that is, membership in it was transferred through the male line, and women moved to another tukhum through marriage. There are various views on the "preservation" of tukhum as the basis of economic and social life at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the factor being the statehood that existed on the territory of Dagestan in various forms. However, along with feudal states, there existed the so-called free societies, which, apparently, for the most part were organized on tukhum principles. However, no matter how the degree of "decomposition" of the tukhum system at the beginning of the 20th century is now assessed, it regulated relations in one way or another and,

apparently, ideas about membership in tukhums, as well as about the principles for transferring this membership, remained in a fairly clear form up to the advent of the Soviet power. It was on these ideas that the system of Soviet nationalities was superimposed. It is obvious that the Austrian Marxists from whose works the Bolsheviks borrowed the idea of Soviet nationalities (Kautsky, 1905; Bauer, 1909) did not write that belonging to a nationality is inherited from one's father, but at the regional — Dagestan — level, it was considered in this way regardless of whether it concerned common people or officials and government workers at all levels, including those issuing passports and the employees of maternity hospitals. As a result, the rule "borrowed" from the tukhum clan system got fixed rather quickly and began to regulate belonging to nationalities.

Why are these considerations important for the modern theory of ethnicity? Located close to the foundation of the primordialist and essentialist view of the world, the idea of belonging to ethnic categories has strangely turned out to be a blind spot in constructivist studies of ethnicity. This is all the more surprising in the context of the fact that kinship systems are one of the most important topics in classical anthropology (Radcliffe-Brown, 1941), and a lot of literature is devoted to the principles of membership in family organizations (among which birth, marriage and entry stand out). Stemming from these works there are also some anthropological works on kinship in modern societies, including those devoted to the changes that "traditional" forms of kinship undergo as a result of the integration of the respective communities into modernity (Gover, 2008). In the literature on ethnicity, the only relevant works are a small number of articles written by the same authors who—basing on interviews—discuss how the ethnicity of children in "mixed" marriages is defined (Caballero, Edwards, Puthussery, 2008; Edwards, Caballero, Puthussery, 2010). Meanwhile, attention to the anthropological roots of the mechanisms for maintaining modern classificatory systems, that is, to some social facts from the past that have "sprouted" in modern societies, e.g., through the principles of inherited belonging to a category, will allow us to get closer to answering why ethnicity have had almost universal relevance in different contexts, including modern ones, as well as to reflect on the prospects of ethnic classifications within the framework of ideology of freedom of self-identification. It is gaining popularity, and at its utmost it implies a departure from collective identities. Such questions, however, lie far beyond the issues that can be explored based on the current state of the constructivist paradigm, and therefore, in the spirit of Chandra's agenda (Chandra, 2012), more concrete empirical models might be proposed for testing. Thus, for example, membership rules in ethnic categories can be intricately related to "ethnic hierarchies": if a less prestigious category is explicitly patrilineal, the prevalence of marriages of women

from this category to men from a more prestigious category will contribute to the fact that, despite the actual social mobility of the population associated with a less prestigious category, the transmission of this category to children will occur almost exclusively in the lower social strata, where men belonging to this category will accumulate. This, in turn, will strengthen the negative image of this category and will only reinforce the described trends. Similar dynamics are observed in modern societies, where there is a high proportion of migrants originating from Muslim patrilineal societies. Such studies, however, require partly a more serious description of the rules for belonging to categories in different contexts, and partly the theoretical contextualization of this issue by various literature, including, for instance, the works devoted to the patterns of functioning of pre-modern institutions in modern societies. To begin with, however, it is necessary to check to what extent patrilineality in defining nationalities is a Dagestani universal, and also what happens to this rule in the contexts where nationalities are supposedly irrelevant, e.g., in mixed cities and in Islamic contexts. This will be the subject of further empirical research.

Returning to the main conclusions based on the results of the study, it should be noted that ethnic issues fall into the "double trap" of meaninglessness. On the one hand, the status and pragmatics of ethnic categories in modern Dagestan are far from obvious, on the other hand, the census itself is hardly meaningful for all participants, despite the fact that it is one of the key forms of ethnicity. It can be assumed that identifying your own ethnicity in an obviously irrelevant context contributes to the process of further irrelevanting ethnicity. Despite all this, the rules according to which ethnicity and its attributes are defined in relation to individuals are clear and universal: according to these rules, nationality is transmitted from the father and never from the mother. The rigidity of these rules and their content suggests that the Soviet classification of nationalities, which came to Dagestan with Soviet power, was interpreted by the local population through the prism of almost obsolete tukhums. This, in turn, allows us to raise the question of the roots of modern forms of ethnicity and to look at ethnicity in a broader historical vein through the prism of constructivist theories suggesting that ethnicity is distinguished from other social classifications by a special rule of membership in ethnic categories.

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