The Role of Nationalities in Dagestan: A Perspective from the Cognitive Turn in Constructivist Ethnicity Studies

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Abstract
This article, situated within the framework of the cognitive turn in the social sciences, presents the findings of a study on the role of nationalities as both a social and cognitive classificatory framework in Dagestan. Conducted between July and August 2024, the study involved 100 biographical interviews across 31 locations throughout the republic. These interviews focused on so-called perceptual-communicative facts—either singular or recurring past events in which nationalities were referenced in communication or used for interpreting events. A total of 1,104 perceptual-communicative facts, attributed to the period from the mid-1940s up to now, were extracted from the interviews and subsequently analyzed. The results indicate that nationalities structured perception and interactions in Dagestan and continue doing that now, although their influence has diminished in certain social environments. The study demonstrates how national categories are internalized, tested, and transmitted across generations and identifies the specific domains in which they operate. The persistence and reproduction of these categories are interpreted through a neo-functionalist lens, drawing on the sociology of mechanisms as developed by Jon Elster and Peter Hedström. By identifying the individual-level social and cognitive pragmatics of employing this classificatory framework in various interactions, the study proposes a model of ethnic dynamics at the intersection of sociology, cognitive science, and history. This work contributes to the literature on ethnicity in Dagestan, provides methodological tools for field research within the cognitive turn, and advances a broader theoretical explanation of ethnic processes.
Keywords
Ethnicity, Dagestan, Nationalities, Oral History, Cognitive Turn

Introduction

What role do nationalities[1] play in organizing social relations in Dagestan? This question is possible within the framework of modern cognitivized constructivist ethnicity studies. The framework considers ethnicity primarily as a classificatory reality, "solidified" as patterns of perception, practices, and institutions. This reality is based on collective ideas of the differences between people—what "types" of people exist, what characteristics each of the types possesses, what rules regulate the relations between them, etc. In order for these ideas to regulate relations, they must become an object of faith and a key to interpreting reality for those in the relations. But how exactly does this happen? What exactly does this framework regulate? How does the situation change over

[1] The term "nationalities" is commonly used in Russian context to refer to various ethnic categories recognized at official/administrative level in Russia.

time? And why do changes occur? These questions are key to modern constructivist ethnicity studies.

In this regard, Dagestan is simultaneously a well-researched and under-researched case. There is a lot of works, including studies within the framework of the constructivist paradigm, that focus on Soviet policy regarding nationalities (Ramazanova, 2016; Gadzhiev, 2008), post-Soviet consociationalism (Ware, Kisriev, 2001; Ramazanova, 2021; Hall, 2015), marital behavior (Gadzhieva, 1985; Gasanov, Abdurazakova, 2018; Varshaver et al., 2024a), the state of "interethnic relations" (Shakhbanova, 2017; Abakarov, 2013), and issues of individual identification of residents (Shakhbanova, 2013; 2016). However, there have been no studies examining the role of nationalities in different spheres of life and as a general categorization framework, especially in Dagestani context. In international research, with rare exceptions (Brubaker, 2018), such a question is also not prevalent. Despite the fact that constructivism is widely accepted as the base paradigm in the modern Western academic community, social sciences tend to focus on more specific issues, while the mechanisms of internalization of categories and their meanings are usually studied exclusively by childhood psychologists (Grieshaber, Gaile, 2001; Umaña‑Taylor et al., 2014).

The focus of this study, in line with the principles of the cognitive turn (Brubaker et al., 2004; Varshaver, 2024a; 2024b), are Soviet Dagestani nationalities as a classificatory framework. This framework was introduced into administrative circulation by the Soviet government in the 1920s, but has since become in many ways a "natural" reality for Dagestanis and a key tool in interpretation of diversity. This transformation—given that Dagestani nationalities are numerous and juxtaposed to one another—makes Dagestan in many ways a model and important case for understanding the ways that ethnicity as a classificatory reality is reproduced in perceptions, ideas and institutions. Methodologically, to the extent that any phenomenon of social reality exists as long as it is communicated and used for interpretation, we focused on the ways that national categories arose in informants' worldview over the course of their lives—whether as an element of external reality or an internal reaction to certain events.

In this context, we developed the concept of perceptual-communicative fact (PC-fact). PC-facts are events or generalizations related to a specific time and place, within which nationalities were used as categories in conversations, written instructions, "internal narrative", interpretation schemas and/or other forms of communication and perception. PC-facts became the basic elementary unit of the collected data and were identified within the in-depth biographical semi-structured interviews. The interview guide involved recollection and reconstruction of the informants' biography timelines, during which questions were asked in relation to each stage of the informants' life. The focus of these follow-up questions was twofold. Firstly, we focused on the ways and

contexts of nationalities being mentioned and discussed, and becoming relevant in the circles and situations in which the person found themselves. Additionally, it was important to pinpoint the extent to which informants themselves interpreted the situation through nationalities, and the extent to which they were used as the basis for formal or informal normativity in general. A total of 100 interviews were collected in different cities and rural areas of the Republic of Dagestan to fulfill particular quotas. Out of this pool of interviews, we identified 1104 PC-facts, which were arranged into a casebook. The earliest PC-fact dates back to 1943, but most of them are dated from the 1980s to the present. These PC-facts became the basis for subsequent reconstruction of the role of nationalities in the perceptual, communicative and institutional reality of Dagestan in recent decades—or, to put it simply, for addressing the role of nationalities in the Republic from the perspective of the cognitive turn in the social sciences.

This paper first outlines the theoretical context of the study and identifies the gap in research—international and devoted to Dagestan. The next section presents the results, which showcase the variety of typical situations in which nationalities are used to communicate or perceive, and the mechanics of their regulating of people's behavior. Finally, in neo-functionalist logic, we make an attempt at tackling the question of why this reality is reproduced in Dagestan, as well as the reasons and ways it changes. The paper concludes with an outline of the theory of ethnic dynamics.

Cognitive Turn in Ethnicity Studies

The cognitive turn is indicative of the general changes occurring in social sciences since the 1960s. Although the cognitive turn is not a strict set of ideas, texts, and names, there are two general approaches to it that can be identified. The first approach is associated with sociological studies of culture in the broad sense, and in particular with the works of Ann Swidler (1986) and Paul DiMaggio (1997). The main innovation and "trademark" of this version of the cognitive turn is the idea that culture is *not* a coherent set of ideas acquired during early socialization and then realized through the actions and biographies of people throughout their lives. Instead, it is referred to as a metaphorical "toolbox" or even a "bag of odds and ends"—a set of loosely related concepts, cognitive schemas, and external modes of action, from which, under the demands of a task or context, a person constructs their ideas and behavior as seen fit. This—attentive to social rituals—framework allows for emotions and their socialization to also become the focus (Peterson, 2006; Kurakin, 2023). The second approach is associated primarily with the works of Eviatar Zerubavel (1999), Serge Moscovici (1988; 1982) and Teun van Dijk (1990; 2017) all of whom, in one form or another, attempted to establish a conceptual link between cognitive psychology and sociology, and describe how collective representations become individualized and spontaneous ways

of perceiving the world, and vice versa. Of the listed researchers, however, only van Dijk has applied the developments to ethnicity-related material (Van Dijk, 2018; 2019).

The cognitive turn only reached ethnicity studies in the mid-2000s—through the works of Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker et al., 2004). Brubaker, having reviewed the main papers in the field of the cognitive turn (both approaches), firstly, proposed to apply them to ethnicity research, and secondly, pointed out that the cognitive turn in ethnicity studies has in fact already begun. Another important notion mentioned by Brubaker was that the constructivist paradigm implies much of what is proclaimed within the framework of the cognitive turn. Among the principles of the cognitive turn as defined by Brubaker, it is worth mentioning the following: (1) anti-groupism and focus, on the one hand, on ethnic categories and their social meanings, and on the other—on the process of categorization itself; (2) focus on the ways categories organize the perception and behavior of ordinary people; (3) using terms and methodologies of the cognitive sciences within the framework of the sociological ethnicity research. Thus, the ethnicity studies "trademark" viewpoint of the cognitive turn—associated with Brubaker—is the idea that ethnicity is not a *thing in* the world, but a *view of* the world.

Contemporary ethnicity studies, however, have only to a small extent adopted the proposed agenda. The works of Evgeni Varshaver (2024a; 2024b) became an interpretation of the Brubakerian synthesis, demonstrating how Brubaker's approach can be implemented within the framework of empirical research, and also proposing a full-fledged theoretical language tailored to this task. A number of studies have been recently carried out within the framework of this agenda (Varshaver et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2024c), and the aim of the study that this paper is based upon—along with acquisition of substantive results—was to apply these theoretical and methodological approaches to the recent past and thereby showcase how the cognitive turn can be implemented in research at the intersection of sociology and history.

Context

Dagestan[2] is a historical region and Republic first within the RSFSR (USSR) and consequently the Russian Federation. It is a useful research context for most issues within the cognitive turn in ethnicity studies. Dagestan brands itself as a multinational republic in which a variety of nationalities live in peace and harmony (Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, n. d.; Rasulova, 2024). What is more interesting from the cognitivist-constructivist standpoint, though, is that the existing pre-modern cultural diversity was

[2] Alternative sp.—Daghestan.

not crudely unified, but, on the contrary, the Soviet national policy of the 1920s served as a framework for its institutionalization and further proliferation (Ramazanova, 2016). This process resulted, among other things, in the creation of the aforementioned "brand". Delving into more detail on the process, the Soviet government initially identified about 40 official nationalities in the Republic (the most numerous of which, in alphabetical order, were the Avars, Dargins, Kumyks, Laks and Lezgins). Later, still under Soviet rule, some of them were unified on an institutional level, as a result of which after World War II their quantity fluctuated between 10 and 15. In the post-Soviet period, however, their numbers rebound to the early-Soviet level (Tishkov, Kisriev, 2007; Varshaver, 2022).

These perturbations are reflected in a large number of primarily historical studies devoted to national policy at its various stages (Karpov, 2017; Kaimarazova, Kaimarazov, 2018; Bely, 2016) and, to a lesser extent, sociological studies. The latter are carried out primarily in quantitative methodology and are devoted to what can be described as the "state of interethnic relations" (Shakhbanova, 2017; Abakarov, 2013) in the Republic, as well as issues of identification of its residents between nationalities and Russian identity (Shakhbanova, 2013; 2016). Research is also conducted on other topics. In particular, at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, a series of studies devoted to the institutions of consociationalism (Ware, Kisriev, 2001; Hall, 2015), ensuring stability in a situation of great ethnic fragmentation, appeared. In particular, research has been done on the State Council (Landa, 2016; Adiev, Kurbanov, 2016), representatives of which were elected according to a quota by nationalities. There are, in addition, studies of ethnic conflicts (Adiev, 2011; Buttaeva, 2012; Varshaver, 2014). Some of this research, however, lies, to a greater extent, in the ballpark of ethnic activism and reflects the positions of individual groups or conflict participants. Most of the aforementioned studies, are only partially based on constructivist epistemology, and studies that take into account the provisions of the cognitive turn have only begun to appear in recent years (Varshaver et al., 2023; 2024a; 2024d; Varshaver, 2022). At the same time, it is precisely within the framework of the cognitive turn that the study of Dagestan as a space of continuous categorization "from above" and "from below" has great potential.

The most important social process that should be considered when approaching the topic of ethnicity in Dagestan is migration of the population (Karpov, Kapustina, 2011; Kazenin, 2012). The movement of the population from the mountainous regions to the plains, including the administrative resettlements, the World War II "cascade" deportations, subsequent return migration, and, in recent decades, mass migration out of Dagestan—all contributed to establishment of a situation in which ethnic categorization was and is carried out daily. Very roughly, all modern contexts in Dagestan can be divided into four types—rural mono-ethnic, bi-ethnic and multi-ethnic, as well as urban

multi-ethnic. Mono-ethnic rural contexts are villages where the absolute majority of residents belong to one official nationality. Such villages are the absolute majority, they are found both in the mountains and in the plains. Bi-ethnic rural contexts (one village or two neighboring villages) are mainly a result of migration processes—concentrated resettlement from one mountainous rural region, or the return of deportees to the areas populated by settlers from their respective home villages. Poly-ethnic rural contexts are settlements that were mainly founded in the 20th century. There, representatives of different official nationalities are represented in varying proportions. Most cities are such, in general, but the mechanisms of the emergence of poly-ethnicity in them differ. The contexts also differ in terms of knowledge and use of languages (Dobrushina, 2007; 2011). Even nowadays, in mono-ethnic contexts, communication between villagers occurs in the corresponding "national" language; knowledge of the Russian language in such contexts varies. In bi-ethnic contexts, people usually know "their own" and, to a greater or lesser extent, other "national" languages, as well as Russian, but this is also due to the fact that such contexts often exist on the plains, and the prevalence of Russian there is higher. In multi-ethnic contexts (especially urban ones), Russian dominates in communication, but "national" languages are still present.

The individual spatial and social trajectories within which Dagestanis move between the aforementioned contexts differ, as well, and are important to outline in relation to subsequent description of biographical material. Most of those born in a rural context spend their childhood there, but then—at least for some time—find themselves in urban, multi-ethnic contexts, which may be due to, for example, obtaining a professional or higher education. Then they either remain "on the plains" or return to their village. Those born in the city spend most of their lives in an urban, multi-ethnic context.

Methodology

The design of the study combines common sociological methods with those of oral history. According to the principles of the cognitive turn in constructivist ethnicity studies, ethnicity—that is, relevant differentiations—does not exist outside of communication. This means that there are two types of phenomena in which it can manifest itself. Firstly, it can imply communication itself in the broadest sense—oral/written, verbal/non-verbal, institutionalized/non-institutionalized, etc. Secondly, to the extent that a message functions as such only if it is perceived by someone, and it is specifically perception, not communication, that is converted into behavior, another important type of phenomena, which were the focus of this study, exist within perceptual reality and are acts of perception. As a result, we conceptualize the so-called perceptual-communicative fact (PC-fact)—in perfect conditions, an instance of communication or perception within which national categories are

communicated or used in the course of interpretation. These events were extracted from informants' narratives related to the recent (yesterday or today) or distant (the earliest fact dates back to 1943) past. During the interviews, these events were reconstructed in as much detail as possible (who said what, to whom, how the informant perceived it) and attributed to a specific year and place. This ensured the factuality of the corresponding event. However, it was not always possible to extract an event as a specific instance—sometimes informants reported that this kind of communication regularly took place over a certain period of time and in a certain place, in which case the PC-fact was classified not as an event, but as a generalization. Thus, a PC-fact has two subtypes—a PC-event and a PC-generalization. The PC-fact was the main unit of data within the framework of the study, and a casebook—a spreadsheet containing all the PC-facts "distilled" during the study—was organized around them. By the end of the study, there were 1104 such PC-facts in the casebook. Each description contained a summary description of the PC-fact itself, a quote from the interview containing it, as well as the time and place to which it related[3].

The PC facts were "distilled" from 100 in-depth biographical interviews conducted in July-August 2024 in Dagestan during a student sociological expedition led by the author of the article and involving 12 people[4]. The interviews were conducted in a total of 31 locations throughout the republic[5] using a sample based on the type of location (mountains—foothills—plains—cities)[6] as well as the age, gender, professional and biographical characteristics of the informants. The interviews were recorded on audio and underwent two rounds of transcription. During the expedition, automatic transcripts were created using artificial intelligence, and at the end of the expedition, manual transcription was performed. Thus, as a result of the expedition, both a casebook consisting of PC-facts and a full array of interviews were prepared. The analysis was carried out through total reading and thematic coding of the casebook. The results of the analysis are presented in the following section. The first part is organized around typical stages of the life path: early

[3] An excerpt from a casebook that illustrates what a PC-fact is:
PC-fact description: "*The informant understood the nationality of her colleagues via the language that they spoke*."
Quote: "Interviewer: *And how did you know that you were Dargins, Laks?* Informant: *Some of them, when they came to the plant, would say* 'hello' to each other in their language. *And I said: 'Now you've started speaking Lak too.' They laughed.* Interviewer: *So you knew who they were by their language, right?* Informant: *Yes*."
Place and time: *between 1967 and 1971, Manaskent, winery*.

[4]The author thanks the expedition participants A. Aleksandrova, A. Alieva, I. Bolgova, A. Iletskaya, A. Ivaschenko, R. Khamazaev, A. Korsakov, E. Shkurko and A. Zasyadko, the expedition co-organizers N. Ivanova and T. Egorova, as well as A. Orlova, who participated in the pilot stage, for their participation in data collection.
[5]The author thanks the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Dagestan Ya. G. Buchaev, the Minister of National Policy and Religious Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan E.S. Muslimov, as well as employees of government organizations at the local level for assistance in organizing data collection.

[6]List of locations: *the cities* of Khasavyurt (2 interviews), Makhachkala (30), Kizilyurt (2), Kaspiysk (1), Izberbash (2), Derbent (2), Buynaksk (2); *the villages* of Edige (2), Shava (2), Khadzhalmakhi (2), Uchkent (2), Tpig (4), Tlokh (4), Tarumovka (2), Sogratl (4), Novosositli (2), Novolakskoye (2), Novokare (2), Megeb (4), Manaskent (2), Mamedkala (2), Madzhalis (2), Levashi (2), Koshkent (4), Korkmaskala (2), Kaya (2), Kalininaul (2), Kadar (2), Gubden (2), Berikey (2), Andi (3).

childhood, school years, and early youth, associated with “coming of age” and communication with wider social circles. The second part concerns different spheres of life in which ethnicity manifests itself: work, marriages and weddings, and politics. The third part describes individual cases where nationalities may have had a greater or lesser relevance as a way of making sense of the surrounding reality, as well as the perceptive-communicative reality outside of Dagestan. These results concern—to a greater or lesser extent—the entire period studied.

Results

Since social categorizations often form a “commonsensical” description of the world, the interactions through which these categories were internalized are often outside the focus of people’s attention and are inaccessible to their memories. This was true for some informants, but another—significant—portion of informants were able to recall memories related to different periods of life, including early childhood.

Early childhood

As follows from the description of the context, Dagestanis’ ethnic and linguistic conditions in their childhood are extremely varied, and usually the first experience of perceived diversity that raises questions in children is the experience of another language. In villages where the only language of communication was one of the Dagestani languages, the trigger for such an experience could be various kinds of people external to the rural community—traders or school teachers. In urban contexts, in turn, these could be relatives visiting neighbors. Other situations that were reproduced from one informant to the other were such of “encountering” linguistic diversity on various kinds of trips—with parents to nearby markets, or with a team to a competition in one of the cities. In a typical case, the following happened: the child heard an unfamiliar language and asked a trusted adult (often a parent) to explain what it meant. In response, the adult conveyed some elements of the description of reality through a national framework, according to which Dagestan is populated by a variety of peoples (nationalities) speaking different languages and differing in culture, but living in harmony. Sometimes, however, it could be the other way around, and the child would first hear adults using the names of nationalities in conversation or even categorizing them on this basis, and this would raise questions. Several times, a situation was described where adults, in the presence of children, “guessed” the nationality of politicians or artists appearing on television or the radio. In response to the child’s question—what was being discussed and how did the adult manage to guess—the adult would also relay to them a general description of the ethnicity structure in one or another level of detail, but with a focus on indicators that allow one to determine what nationality a

person is. The indicators, in cases like this, are typical linguistic markers—an accent in Russian (which "gives away" the native Dagestani language of the speaker), or the language itself, which a significant portion of "Dagestani"-speaking people in Dagestan can "guess" (importantly—not everyone, as this ability is associated with the actual audial familiarity with these languages). While language is absolutely the dominant trigger for a child to first notice diversity, in many situations language "came accompanied" with other conspicuous forms of cultural otherness. Such forms could be, for example, items of clothing. For example, in one village in the Tsumada administrative area[7] in the early 1970s, children were surprised that geologists stationed near the village wore shorts, while all the men in the village wore long pants.

Adults, however, rarely conveyed a systematic picture of Dagestani construction of ethnicity. Moreover, the child was present at numerous conversations and actual categorizations used in a specific context, as a result of which one or another categorical label was "assigned" to specific people, but these labels themselves were not yet part of a larger classificatory system for the children. This situation is typical for most rural contexts on the plains (quite more often multiethnic to an extent compared to mountains), in which children know the nationality labels of people living in the village, know who is of which nationality (or rather, those who are of nationalities that are "unusual" for the village) and what makes representatives of some nationalities special. They do not yet know what exactly—except for designating specific people they know—these categories mean. For example, for a child from the mountainous Gunib area, who spent a significant part of his time in the late 1960s in the kutan[8] of his village, the category of "Koreans" (which was used in the Avar language, which he and those around him spoke) designated specific people who appeared in the kutan at the beginning of the summer season, cultivated watermelons, and "disappeared somewhere" at the end of the season. For him, "Koreans" were not, in fact, a nationality comparable to other nationalities (including "Avars", to which he nominally belonged). In addition, from time to time, the informants mentioned cases in which nationalities in one form or another were communicated to rural children by other villagers at the *godekan*, the center of rural life. For example, in one of the villages of the Kuli area in the mid-1960s, elders told children that earlier, among all the Lak villages, their village was not inferior to Kumukh, the recognized local center, education-wise. In addition, if the children themselves at this age had not yet encountered nationalities at the level of official documents, this categorization had already been carried out in relation to them. For example, in kindergarten their nationality could be taken into account, lists of groups could be created with

[7] For brevity, the administrative areas will further be referred to as simply "areas".
[8] *Kutan* is a plot of land on the plains, typically assigned to a mountainous village in order to provide land for cultivation of produce. Kutans were and are typically a seasonal place of residence, with villagers coming in to work in the agriculture in summer and leaving for the village after the harvest.

references to nationalities, etc., and this information could circulate in the background for the children.

In general, thus, up to the age of 7-8 years old, most Dagestanis, firstly, have received some experience of real cultural, primarily linguistic, diversity. Secondly, they were present during conversations in which national categories were used (in general and in relation to specific people), and even during actual categorization. Thirdly, they often have the experience of a conversation with a significant adult who, in one way or another, interprets diversity for them. With this "baggage", the child comes to school, where they are given a more systematic picture, describing cultural diversity through the prism of nationalities.

School

At school, especially at a secondary (middle-school) level, the official construction of ethnicity is transmitted within the framework of various subjects and lessons. According to the curriculum, in general, it was taught that there are different peoples or nationalities living in Dagestan in close proximity to each other, connected by a relationship of friendship and experience of speaking Russian. At the same time, however, each of them has its own language and its own cultural characteristics. These peoples in the lessons and the curricula are tied to specific names, and—in addition to language—a variety of elements of material and non-material culture: clothing, activities, folklore, etc. The curriculum also states that each nationality lives on its own territories and in its own regions of Dagestan, has famous people who are its representatives; as well as detailing how exactly the "friendship of peoples" is manifested (from kunak visits[9] to fighting side by side against the Nazi invaders). As a result, knowledge about nationalities-peoples and their attributes and relationships between them, obtained from a source that has undeniable authority, from which other general knowledge about the world is also obtained, together with that general knowledge, forms a background, unproblematic picture of the world.

At school, the "ethnic" part of this picture is also supported by two typical, reproducible interactions. First, during the described lessons or via school holidays, "festivals" of nationalities are held, at which schoolchildren put on "national" costumes, read and recite poems, sing songs and/or demonstrate other attributes of nationalities. If there are nominal representatives of certain nationalities in the class or school, they are tasked with "representing" the corresponding cultures, but usually (especially in mountain villages) there is an "incomplete set" of nationalities in the class,

[9] *Kunak* is a visitor or guest in the village, representative of a neighboring village or any other outsider. Kunak visits as an institution are a common way of building trust-based relations between settlements in Dagestan.

and as a result, roles are “distributed” among schoolchildren of one nationality, and at the event they represent other nationalities.

At the same time, the school as an institution can collect information about the nationality of schoolchildren, forming lists accordingly, and teachers can find out and discuss it with schoolchildren on their own initiative, and schoolchildren themselves can—in different forms—discuss it among themselves. A special form of communication between schoolchildren on this topic are questionnaire notebooks in which classmates answer questions from a list (name, surname, favorite color, favorite writer, etc.), where one of the questions can be a question about nationality. Such a notebook, for example, was circulated around the classroom of a school in one of the villages of the Suleiman-Stal area in 1985. Such communication, however, is typical primarily for multiethnic (cities and plains) contexts, and it is often from this communication that schoolchildren learn about each other’s nationality, as a result of which the national framework “descends” into their closest circle. Additionally, in such contexts, there is another commonality—the practice of splitting schoolchildren into groups at the “Native language” lessons. In general, this distribution occurs on the basis of nominal nationality; schoolchildren know who has been assigned to which group, they discuss it, and, thus, information about the nationality of their classmates “settles” in their mind.

Other common situations of nationality being communicated at schools include, for example, teachers introducing newcomers to the class by nationality. Around this time, in addition, young Dagestanis received their first documents (or got acquainted with existing ones), which indicated (and some still do), their nationality and that of their parents. These include birth certificates, passports, military IDs, etc. And, in general, this is exactly how—due to the diversity of interactions of a formal and informal nature, all of which generally consistently reproduce the official construction of ethnicity—this construction is fixed in the ideas and perceptions of Dagestanis at school already.

This construction, however, can begin to “break down” and become problematic quite soon—when it turns out, for example, that a neighbor speaks the “national” language of the place of residence fluently, but is a representative of another nationality, but such problematic information is often explained one way or another in order to “fit” it into the general construction. In terms of the internalization of the construction of ethnicity, however, mono-ethnic and poly-ethnic contexts differ. For people socialized in poly-ethnic contexts (and especially in cities), the connection between the official construction of ethnicity and specific people around them occurs relatively smoothly and naturally. For people who grew up in mono-ethnic contexts (especially in mountain villages), there

was little experience of seeing representatives of other nationalities before graduation, which is why they, in general, have yet to connect categories and people.

In public

For such schoolchildren from non-urban contexts, this connection happens at the next stage of their lives, when a significant part of them leaves their home village at least temporarily to study at a university or technical school/college (but also to enroll in the army or to work, which is discussed in a later section). This typically means finding themselves not just in a multi-ethnic context, but in a context where everyone is actively getting acquainted, that is, introducing themselves and categorizing others. From context to context, and from description to description, a construction is reproduced within the informants' narratives, where nationality is included in the "basic set" of information that is communicated about oneself when getting to know each other and, thus, is found out about another person. Specific forms of how people learn this information may vary, in some cases it is communicated by people immediately upon acquaintance, in others the ritual involves a question about the other's "nation" and a follow-up answer, in others this information is learned during the first days and weeks after encounter by indirect indicators (accent, place of birth) or is clarified on their basis. Moreover, sometimes asking someone about their nationality is considered indecent behavior, and sometimes, on the contrary, there is nothing shameful in the question. The normativity of the "nationality-question", in addition, can be associated with gender—in some contexts, situations were not welcomed when a man asked the "nationality-question" upon meeting a woman, despite the fact that between men this was not forbidden. In addition, apparently, issues of nationality were discussed less among women than men in general. It is also important that the question of nationality was and is often linked to the area and/or village, and this allows us to formulate certain hypotheses about the *allocation function* of nationalities (this will be discussed in the "Discussion" section). In general, however, in most cases, at universities and colleges, students learned each other's nationality quite quickly. This could also take place in a slightly more institutionalized manner. An informant noted that during one of the first classes at Dagestan State Pedagogical University in 1975, a list was passed around the classroom by students, on which they wrote their first name, last name, and nationality. Simultaneously, such information was collected by the universities themselves—for example, in pedagogical universities, with the aim of assigning future school teachers of national languages to the appropriate classes. In general, nationality is included in the "basic set" of information about a person, which is communicated, found out, or otherwise revealed at the first stages of acquaintance. And, once collected, this information is immediately applied to a variety of cognitive and communicative operations.

Primarily, it is used in order to choose the language of communication in various social situations. In case when all people taking part in communication act are of the same nationality, it is assumed by default that they are proficient in the national language, and there is a high probability of the communication switching to this language. At the same time, however, there exists a common norm of politeness in multi-ethnic contexts, posing that it is impolite to speak in a Dagestani language in the presence of representatives of other nationalities. Thus, information about nationalities regulates the language regime of everyday interactions. Another common variant of its use is ethnic jokes organized around rather articulate stereotypes about nationalities. Each of the "main" nationalities is associated with a certain image (Avars are straightforward and brave, but stupid; Dargins are rich, but stingy; Laks are smart, but cunning; Kumyks are civilized, but weak-tempered etc.), which can be used in humorous/joking communication, widespread in multi-ethnic contexts. "Scenarios" of such humorous communication may be different, however, in general, they connect the action or behavior of a specific person with a stereotype in relation to an ethnic category. At the same time, the person whose behavior is being discussed does not necessarily have to be a representative of the corresponding category: for example, if one does not want to tip in a cafe, it is quite enough to ask if they are related to any Dargins. With that such communication can be qualified as an ethnic joke, thereby reproducing both the stereotypes themselves and the normativity of interpreting situations through the nationalities lens.

But do Dagestanis believe in these stereotypes? The period of "coming of age" and into the wider social contexts after school is a time when the construction of ethnicity is tested as a cognitive framework, and this issue is resolved, among other things, at the individual level. And although the general construction of ethnicity could have failed at certain isolated points earlier (for example, as mentioned, a Kumyk-speaking person, who, according to the general rule, should be a Kumyk, turning out to be a Dargin), this period poses the question of the extent to which the framework, which until then existed mainly as an abstraction, can be used to build real relationships with people. Moreover, each person who spends a lot of time in a multi-ethnic context in which they know the nationalities of those around them, gradually accumulates a fairly large volume of quasi-statistical data, which allows, in a sense, to test hypotheses about the real connection between nationality and behavior. And—despite the fact that Dagestanis generally believe that those are precisely stereotypes—if the behavior of their acquaintances, whose nationality is known, corresponds to a stereotype about a nationality, this is usually noted and put "in the backlog" of facts about the world, and it is often concluded that although not all representatives of the corresponding nationalities have corresponding traits, "there is some truth" to these stereotypes. As a result, Dagestan nationalities, among other things, exist as a weak statistical predictive model—Dagestanis do not rely solely on it

in important decisions, but they do not completely abandon it whenever else. Such quasi-statistical testing occurs primarily in the first years after entering those wider contexts, due to the fact that it is precisely then when Dagestanis most often secondarily socialize in multi-ethnic contexts and juxtapose their knowledge acquired at school to real people. Their friends socialized in the city also join in on these practices, as for them the context of the university or vocational school also becomes a context for acquiring new acquaintances, which is why a significant part of Dagestan's population ends up involved in this social game.

There is indeed an element of game in determining nationalities. It is often mentioned that in the street, in transport and in other public contexts, strangers can approach and guess—based on the language, accent in Russian, appearance and other features—what nationality a person is, testing a hypothesis that they came up with spontaneously, despite the fact that this usually does not have any immediate practical benefits. Such practices resemble something akin to both gambling and small talk. At the same time, however, it is precisely in the context of studying in vocational educational institutions that Dagestanis practically for the first time (as this quite frequently does not happen at school level) get the idea that nationality can be the basis for preferences and discrimination. As a result, students quickly find out their teachers' nationalities, and base their actions accordingly. For instance, if a student is of the same nationality and knows their native language, they can talk to the teacher in this language and, due to this, expect future informal support in the education process, although this support does not necessarily actually follow. In addition, there may be rumors about some teachers posing that they are "nationalists" and give worse grades to representatives of a specific nationality. Again, regardless of whether this is true or not, such ideas are also reproduced during secondary socialization in "big" Dagestan during student years.

In general, to the extent that a person is integrated into certain multi-ethnic contexts, into which other Dagestanis are integrated at the same time, and in connection with the fact that nationalities are mentioned in these contexts, by young adulthood people become quite qualified consumers and at the same time producers of the national framework—they know the Dagestan nationalities, their properties, desirable relations between them (friendship) and norms of behavior when interacting with representatives of other nationalities (speaking Russian), they can determine a person's nationality by various features, for them this information is an element of basic information about a person, etc. With this knowledge they enter adulthood. Some of the recent students return to their rural contexts and become agents of transmitting the national framework to children, namely as school teachers. They teach school children about Dagestani nationalities using the same templates that were once taught to them, but with a touch of their experience "from the plains". Indirectly, they also transmit the national framework to those people who left the village for a shorter period of time

or never left it at all. But a significant portion of former villagers, as well as the absolute majority of city dwellers, after graduating from an educational institution (and sometimes even earlier) remain in various multi-ethnic contexts in which nationalities continue to be used for categorization and understanding the surrounding reality. Moving further along the biographical line—given that the corresponding events may not occur or may occur earlier—let us consider how nationalities function in relation to marital behavior, labor relations, and in the political sphere.

Courtship, wedding and marriage

Nationalities are mentioned quite often in the context of marital attitudes and behavior, but upon further elaboration it becomes clear that only in some cases they are exactly what is being discussed. Primarily, though, it is a matter of an attitude (usually conveyed by parents to their children) to marry "one's own" people, where "one's own" usually means fellow villagers or people whose family comes from the same villages from which the speaker's family. In some situations, however, this attitude "breaks down" against the actual impossibility of such marriages. This may happen if the family has no specific village that it comes from, or if the village is very small, or if it no longer exists. In this case, within the framework of particularistic attitudes, nationalities are usually used to limit the number of potential partners, and it is explicitly stated that marriage is only possible with representatives of "one's own" nationality. Moreover, such attitudes can combine rural restrictions and nationality restrictions and sound something like this: "if one cannot marry a fellow villager, then the future spouse could be at least a representative of the same nationality." This also applies to Dagestani Russians, for whom, however, the verbalized attitude to marry a Russian will often actually mean marrying a non-representative of one of the Dagestani nationalities. In addition, no matter how the attitudes are structured internally (and no matter how different the verbalized and implied meanings are), nationalities are a framework that is used to describe and discuss not just marital behavior, but potential and actual married couples. For example, in predominantly mono-ethnic villages, as already mentioned, one of the most common situations in which strangers may appear is marriage, with the wife "brought to the village", if she nominally belongs to a different nationality, to be identified in conversations by it.

In parallel with this, an important context in which nationalities are discussed is weddings. The fact is that it is wedding rituals that are the most obvious case of incorporation of various elements of the culture of the past into everyday life, and at the same time of real cultural differences. Most Dagestanis who regularly attend weddings of relatives are well aware of the rituals common in their family and neighbor circles, and, in this regard, any different rituals (be it weddings of neighbors in multi-ethnic locations or friends from an educational institution) arouse interest, and

the differences themselves are discussed and explained through nationality framework. At the same time, the description of these differences often includes recognition that within one nationality, marriage rites may differ just as well as they may be similar in different ones. This fact can be one of the typical "breakdowns" of the basic construction of ethnicity, which is experienced by many Dagestanis, and instances of reflection on which exist in the discourse. Marriage rituals, thus, in a rather paradoxical and at the same time model for Dagestan way, become the space for simultaneous reproduction and vernacular deconstruction of categorization by nationalities.

Workplace

Speaking of multi-ethnic contexts, ethnicity in the workplace (informal relations, selection for positions, etc.) functions in many ways similarly to educational institutions, the only difference being that "getting to know each other" does not happen at the same time for everyone, and rather the newcomer becomes a person of interest for an already established team, just as they themselves gradually find out important information about the people with whom they work. Again, the set of "basic" data about a person includes their nationality. Moreover, it is often registered by the HR departments of organizations, and, thus, at least the management has access to this information. As a result, due to various interactions, employees, in general, know the nationality of their colleagues. As in educational institutions, this information is used to choose the language of communication, for banter, but also to interpret the dynamics of the team and the professional sphere as a whole. For example, career success and preferential treatment in hiring may be discursively linked to the fact that employees and managers are of the same nationality. Or it is claimed that a manager establishes more informal relationships with representatives of "his own" nationality and prefers to take them on business trips. Entire jobs may be linked to certain nationalities. For example, among workers in the oil and gas industry in the 1970s, it was believed that "Dagneft" (the state-owned oil company) was an "Avar company". However, only a few informants experienced preferential treatment or, on the contrary, discrimination, and in general it is more likely to be noted that it was rumored and this was said to be the case, rather than there being more "solid evidence" of discrimination in the workplace. A more detailed discussion of this topic often led an informant to the idea that nationality was rarely taken into account when hiring or promoting, and it was more likely to be a matter of various types of nepotism—specifically hiring of relatives and other people close to the hiring authority. At the same time, national categorization is almost universally used in describing such situations. Workplaces and, in general, organizations—in particular their top management—are, in addition, the territory of vernacular consociationalism. For example, at least among the ordinary employees of the hospital in the Tarumovka area, it is believed that the head doctor of the hospital should be Russian,

and his deputy—a representative of another nationality. Similar things happen in other workplaces and, apparently, apply mainly to state organizations. Public service organizations, in addition, at least in Soviet times, also routinely took into account the nationality of citizens and recorded it in written form. Thus, in the case of the aforementioned Tarumovka hospital, information about nationality was indicated on the cover of the medical record. Thus, the reality of nationalities was also maintained during work interactions.

Politics

However, it is politics at various levels that was, and, apparently, still (at least to some degree) is the main space of consociationalism. One of the informants quite straightforwardly indicated that he felt that he was an Azerbaijani at the moment when he—then, in 1959, a worker at a factory in Derbent—was invited to the party-related organization in order to "cover" the Azerbaijani quota. In general, the system works as follows. Each territory is characterized by a certain ratio of representatives of different nationalities living on it. This proportion is calculated on the basis of the results of the census and other statistics. In addition, it exists in the ideas of people, being tied to the idea that nationalities should be taken into account in order to ensure a fair distribution of positions. This distribution is not necessarily strictly proportional, it can be arranged differently depending on the actual nominal proportions, it is important, however, to note that Dagestanis often pay attention to political leadership at all levels from this angle, thereby—in the absence of formal institutions—reproducing consociationalism in an informal way. This, in all likelihood, was facilitated by the flourishing of institutional ethnicity in Dagestan in the 1990s, the echoes of which were manifested not only in the vernacular consociationalism, but also in the actions of national NGOs, which often rivaled each other, but, through joint efforts, entrenched a view of various phenomena through the framework of nationalities. Participants in these organizations zealously monitored and still monitor both the distribution of positions of power and, for example, mentions of nationalities in certain contexts. For instance, an activist of the Kumyk organization Tenglik in 1992 actively drew the attention of society to the fact that in a certain textbook, the Kumyks were not mentioned among the Turkic peoples and associated this omission with the "machinations" of the Minister of Education, an Avar. These organizations still exist, as well as the discourse they produced is reproduced.

Ethnicization and its variability

What is described above is a general model, a description of the construction of ethnicity, to which all people who grew up and live in Dagestan relate at least to some extent. All of them have

encountered real cultural diversity and—due to interactions over the course of their lives—have gained access to the "key" for interpreting it through the national framework, explained to them in most detail at school. All of them, in one way or another (as listeners or speakers) have been and remain involved in conversations in which national categories are reproduced. However, the extent to which the national framework has (or has not) become an everyday tool for interpreting reality and a factor influencing behavior for them differs significantly. Attempting—in a very preliminary way—to describe and explain the existing variability, it is possible to distinguish two cases when nationalities have become and remain an important framework for interpreting reality, and two cases in which this is not the case.

The first informant was born in the territory of the modern Republic of Chechnya, where a rural community from the Kaytag area of the republic was resettled as part of the cascade deportations, disbanding the village of origin. He spent his childhood, however, in a village on the plains in the Derbent area. He then did military service and studied outside Dagestan, and worked both in Makhachkala and in his village on the plains. The descriptions related to all stages of life in his narrative are ethnicized, that is, to most of the people he talks about nationalities are assigned. This kind of narrative ethnicization, however, was widespread in the village on the plain where he grew up: different parts of the village were associated with nationalities; the neighbors were Russian, Dargin, and Tabasaran both in conversations and perceptions. For example, in the late 1960s, when some woman brought them a chudu[10], his mother said that "that *Lezgin* brought the chudu." The informant is sure that people of different nationalities should be friends and one should not pay attention to nationalities, but he is also sure that nationalities differ in culture and character.

The second informant is the aforementioned former activist of the Kumyk national organization Tenglik, which dealt primarily with land issues, but—in many ways—interpreted them through the framework of nationalities. Where the episodes of his personal biography (he was born in a village near Makhachkala in 1949), as he tells it, were ethnicized only to a small extent before the 1990s, after joining Tenglik, his view of the world became significantly more ethnicized. His narratives include "Avars", who seize "Kumyk land", he is fervent about public representations of the Kumyks, and even "snatches" episodes from the past that support an ethnicized picture of the world. In particular, he talks about a classmate from the village of Andi, an Avar according to his documents, who also believed that Avars must not have been on the plains, which he told the informant when they saw a group of Avars together in the mid-1970s.

[10] *Chudu* is a type of flatbread with various fillings (meat, potatoes, greens), a popular appetizer in Dagestan.

In the third case, however, the informant is a teacher from a mountain village, born in 1956, who studied for several years in her youth at the Dagestan State Pedagogical University and then worked all her life at the school in her village, and never learned to recognize nationalities by language. For her nationalities are almost exclusively equalized to what she once studied at school in the 1960s (for example, for her, Russians are cosmonauts Gagarin and Tereshkova), what she teaches her students now, as well as memories of life in Makhachkala 50 years ago, where her best friend was a Dargin (which the informant learned about in the way described in the section "In public"), and she rented a room from a Jewish woman. In her everyday life of the last 40+ years, nationalities are almost never used by her and the people around her as a relevant classificatory framework, and they are apparently absent in her worldview.

The fourth case is a young man who was born in 2001 in Makhachkala, a student at the Islamic University in Makhachkala and an athlete who competes in mixed martial arts. He also knows the names of nationalities and in his circles nationalities are sometimes used during introductions and getting to know each other. He does not know the nationalities of a significant part of his classmates, does not consider it important, cannot distinguish between languages and accents in Russian (quite possibly because these accents have lost their specificity in recent years and in the cities have formed a single Dagestani accent in Russian), moreover, when asked why he himself mentions nationality when introducing people, he answers that this happens rather as a force of habit, because it is accepted, and nationality does not carry any value for him information-wise. It is important, however, that at the university where he studies, contrary to expectations, "anti-national agenda" is not present, and his attitude towards nationalities is not determined by an ideological position. Several other young residents of Dagestani cities also indicated that at least in some environments there exists an "erosion" of the national framework as a social and cognitive tool, but at the same time there were also reverse cases—when young people used the national framework in the same way as older people. Interpretations of this situation are discussed in the corresponding section. Note that even for the informants listed above as cases of extreme ethnicization of the surrounding reality, nationalities are not a framework through which all people, situations, places, etc. are interpreted without exception—rather, they, for various reasons, apply it more often and in a wider range of contexts. This issue will be discussed in more detail later.

Outside Dagestan

The picture, however, would be incomplete if we did not take into account the fact that many Dagestanis have various kinds of travel or life experience outside of Dagestan, as a result of which they find themselves in the context of other constructions of ethnicity. For example, those in which

they are defined in various collective categories—such as “Caucasians”[11] (also often designated by various vernacular pejoratives) or “Dagestanis”. This experience is present in different generations of Dagestanis. The most common way to acquire it is through military service, during which Dagestanis themselves rarely introduce themselves via nationality, and their comrades usually only need to know that they are Dagestanis. At the same time, on the way to the army (for example, on a train heading outside the Republic) or if fellow Dagestanis meet outside the Republic, the acquaintance takes place according to the ritual described above and includes information about nationality. In addition, if among the older generations there were only a few who grew up outside Dagestan, with the intensification of movements and migrations of all types, there are now people who spent their childhood in different parts of Russia and even abroad. It is interesting that, although they are identified by the local population of the corresponding locations via collective categories, the idea that they are representatives of one of the Dagestani nationalities (and not Dagestanis in general) was often transmitted in their families, and certain rules of behavior could be associated with this (for example, in Ashgabat in 1993, a father told a 13-year-old informant that “Lak girls should stay home at night”). In addition, there were cases when Dagestani people, already adults, “visited Russia” (although Dagestan is an administrative unit within Russia, Dagestanis commonly refer to such journeys in this wording) to earn money and live there, and in such cases, again “for outsiders” they were Caucasians or Dagestani people, but in the course of acquaintance and interaction with each other, the framework of Dagestani nationalities re-emerged. The availability of other categorization frameworks increased with the widespread penetration of the Internet, as a result of which Dagestani people—without leaving Dagestan—could become familiar with these frameworks, manifested in popular culture. It is likely that the availability of this and other categorization frameworks could also have influenced the unconditional nature of the categorization by nationality, but this issue will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

Social and cognitive relevance of nationalities

To what extent does categorization by nationality structure perception and interaction in Dagestan? It is a difficult question to answer based on the collected and analyzed data only. Since the guide was devoted to ethnicity, it stimulated more ethnicized interpretations of events than had occurred in the past—or would have occurred now if the interviewers had not been explicitly interested in the topic of ethnicity. Nevertheless, reflecting on the data and the process of its

[11] *Caucasians* in Russian context refers specifically to the population of the Caucasus mountains region, as opposed to the common usage of it to refer to the category of “white” in the English and international literature.

collection, as well as bringing in results of other author's research projects in Dagesta, it is possible to attempt to come up with an answer. On the one hand, nationalities are indeed a topic that explicitly concerns only a minority of Dagestanis. On the other hand, for the absolute majority, they are a background, unproblematic reality that is usually not reflected upon. In the event that reflection does occur, Dagestanis may disagree on the extent to which nationalities describe real differences, or whether they are mostly "mind games". In general, nationalities—like other vernacular concepts—exist on the periphery of public consciousness. In addition, as was mentioned, Dagestanis also differ in terms of the cognitive ethnicization of the surrounding reality. There are those for whom nationalities are firmly tied to people—for them, nationalities are "woven" into their interpretation of the world, even if they do not consider that there are many differences between people of different nationalities, and do not prefer some nationalities (including their own) to others. At the same time, there are those for whom this is absolutely not the case. Apparently, at least one of the factors that influences this is the connectedness to the "machinery of nationality production", an example of which is any university in Makhachkala from the 1970s to the early 2000s. What exactly is so special about this time period will be discussed later. The national framework is also not absolute in terms of structuring social life. For example, nationalities generally do not limit the circle of people with whom it is acceptable to enter into working and friendly relations (even though "interethnic friendships" can be cognitively distinguished and discussed in a positive way). However, for example, the marriage market is indeed regulated to a much greater extent by various particularistic categorizations, including nationalities. In addition, Dagestanis have a background understanding that, although they themselves are "not nationalists" (an important attitude in Dagestan), various kinds of favoritism based on nationalities and discrimination can manifest themselves in the behavior of other people and are present as a practice and attitude in Dagestan. In other words, when communicating, the cognitive and social existence of nationalities reproduce each other, based on which we can say that nationalities in Dagestan as a categorization framework are thriving rather than dying out. But why?

Mechanisms of reproduction of nationalities: individual utility and background inertia

In order to answer this question, we appeal to functionalism as a theoretical tool, and in particular to the approach known as *analytical sociology* or the *sociology of mechanisms* (Hedström, 2005; Elster, 2015; Hedström, Swedberg, 1996; 1998: 45). This neo-functionalist approach denies the obligatory systematicity and, at the same time, teleology of classical functionalism. The main idea within its framework is that certain social phenomena are reproduced if they turn out to be, in the broadest sense, useful for the participants in the interactions associated with them. It is precisely

the reproducing individual utility that should be analyzed within the framework of this approach. So how are nationalities useful for Dagestanis? Below, the pragmatics of the use of nationalities are presented, the background mechanisms of their reproduction are described.

Firstly, nationalities are a *means of social allocation*, an indicator of belonging to a certain cluster in a network of relations. Knowledge of the nationality of an interlocutor, classmate or colleague allows one to include this cluster in one's own network. Usually, nationality goes hand in hand with information about the area and village of origin. Moreover, often after exchanging information about nationality, area and village, there follows a search for mutual acquaintances, which—despite the fact that it does not bring any specific benefit here and now—in the long-run potentially could—for example, to find someone in this village, or vice versa, if the interlocutor is a potential business partner, to have a leverage if something goes wrong. Nationality in this sense is a primary and very rough indication of where a person was born and lived, as well as who they know and who—if anyone—would stand up for them.

Secondly, however, nationalities, regardless of the area or village of origin, are *a tool for improving individual position* in the flatlands, primarily urban contexts. The very fact of belonging to the same nationality as a student and a teacher, a seller and a buyer—can become both a basis for influence in order to obtain a particular preference (a higher mark or a discount) and information based on which—without special influence—a preference can be achieved in the first place.

In this regard, but rather thirdly, it is possible to state that nationalities are, if we use the terminology of classical sociology, a tool for finding warm Gemeinschaft-relationships in a cold, anonymized urban Gesellschaft-context, and this—in addition to preferences—can be singled out as a separate mechanism for their reproduction.

The fourth, more pragmatic and understandable, way of using information about nationalities and the type of "pragmatics" for categorizing people this way is connected with the fact that nationality is an indication of what languages a person knows and what languages they do not. This, in turn, allows, firstly, to reduce the communication barrier in a situation when an interlocutor is of the same nationality, allowing to have the conversation in a language that is more convenient for both parties. Secondly, it helps organize a special communication mode, which, due to communication in a language known to some, but unknown to others, specifically excludes the latter from communication. Thirdly, on the contrary—to follow the common for Dagestan norm of communicating only in Russian in the presence of people who do not know the language in which some of those present could otherwise communicate. For all this, it is necessary to know who knows what languages, and the most compact way to find this out is by asking a "nationality-question".

The fifth “pragmatics” of nationalities is *interpretative and prognostic*. Nationalities, or rather the stereotypical characteristics they are endowed with, are in some ways used partly to explain people’s behavior, partly to predict and prevent it. Note that Dagestanis do not expect that representatives of nationalities will necessarily and fully correspond to stereotypes about them, moreover, they do not make decisions based on these stereotypes. When looking for an accountant, they do not automatically give preference to Dargins, and when looking for a security guard—to Avars. But at the same time, if a person’s behavior corresponds to their nationality, this can be noted both verbally and cognitively. In addition, cognitive biases can also come into play—a person will more often pay attention to rare cases when stereotypes are reproduced than to situations when this does not happen. As a result, nationalities function as a kind of vernacular statistical regression model of small, but non-zero explanatory power. Not only behavior is interpreted within the framework of this function, but also differences in material and ritual culture. In this case, again, nationalities become a way of talking about these differences and it is immediately recognized that the differences are actually structured differently, and the wedding rituals of one nationality may as well all be different, while, conversely, being similar for different nationalities.

Stereotypes also underlie another, sixth, “pragmatics”, which can be described as *integrative*. As was said, Dagestanis almost everywhere make fun of each other based on ethnic stereotypes. Although the jokes themselves are quite rude, this is acceptable, firstly, if the participants in the communication are connected to each other by friendly, amicable, or collegial relations, secondly, if the one making the joke does not intend to offend, and thirdly, precisely because, in general, these stereotypes, as was said above, have little in common with reality. At the same time, to the extent that humorous relationships partly indicate closeness, and partly create this closeness, nationalities also turn out to be a tool for building and maintaining closeness between nominal representatives of different nationalities and, theoretically, can work, to put it via classical versions of functionalism, for systemic integration.

There is, however, a seventh benefit, more of an emotional-symbolic nature. It entails that nationalities in collective representations (and especially in the representations of those who belong to the corresponding nationalities) have a powerful positive symbolic aura, and—in the logic of the theory of social identity—identification and association with one’s nominal nationality allows one to join the corresponding “symbolic complex”. Moreover, to the extent that such series are increasingly connected with images of the past, nationalities are a kind of “window” into the traditions and traditionality valued in modern times.

It is important, however, that in addition to this kind of individual utility or “pragmatics”, there are three mechanisms of contextual reproduction of nationalities—symbolic, administrative and

communicative. Drawings in textbooks, exhibitions in museums, plaques on administrative buildings and other visual information provide Dagestanis with a background construction of ethnicity. Nationalities are indicated in documents, appear as a question in the census, and information organized by nationality is published in statistical reference books and, from there, is distributed to other media (for example, it ends up on the location pages in Wikipedia in the "population" section). Nationalities, in addition, are "woven" in the communicative fabric of Dagestan: as was mentioned, they are an element of the basic set of knowledge about a person, and information about nationality is learned and recorded as part of the ritual of acquaintance. In addition, social inertia as a whole contributes to the reproduction of nationalities—through the lens of nationalities, the world was previously explained, jokes were made, preferences were sought, etc. by elders, and therefore this instrument can continue to be used.

Erosion of nationalities in urban youth environments

How does the situation change over time? Given that what is described in both the Results and the Discussion sections characterizes to some extent the entire period that was studied (at least from the 1970s to the present day), and, in general, nationalities are successfully reproduced as a social and cognitive framework, it is possible to say that separate social contexts and environments are emerging in which nationalities are losing their usefulness and, in general, are eroding. In the study, this effect was recorded and analyzed in relation to urban youth. Thus, if a few decades ago the majority of residents of Dagestani cities were first- or second-generation city dwellers and had strong ties to villages and administrative areas, today's city youth, even if they regularly visit the villages where their parents came from as children, no longer have such strong ties with those and it is rather pointless to mentally include them in the corresponding network of connections that is approximated by nationality. The same goes for language—those born in cities, even if they know the language of "their nationality", do not speak it fluently, and they certainly prefer Russian, which makes it impossible to switch to the national language with the same effect as it was done in older generations. In addition, nationality ceases to be an "anchor" for establishing close relationships in an anonymized city—those born there often have a "set" of social circles—school, neighborhood, sports club, mosque, workplace, and it turns out that they simply do not need to search for additional grounds for closeness. In cities, the situation with real behavioral and ritual diversity also changes—both in terms of language, actual behavior, and of wedding rituals, new cultural patterns are mixed and formed in cities. These patterns and differences between them, on the one hand, are not interpreted through the national framework, on the other, perhaps are objectively worse "snapshot" by it. In addition, there is also the phenomenon of "mixed-ness" of the urban population,

with more and more people having parents of different nationalities. Besides, there is also the penetration of modern versions of Islam, which explicitly oppose the division of people into nationalities. As a result, in some youth circles, nationalities are gradually ceasing to be used as a communicative and interpretative framework, and some informants directly pointed out that nationalities have “outlived their usefulness” and are used out of force of habit. The dynamics, moreover, are taking place in a nationwide political context, in which institutional changes are taking place, and if in the early 2000s there was a consociational body, the State Council, to which representatives were elected according to the nationality quota, this body has been abolished for more than 20 years. This, however, does not change the fact that, firstly, nationalities, if we take the Republic as a whole, as has already been mentioned, are “rather thriving than dying”, and secondly, in some contexts they can work differently and reproduce themselves based on local logic and pragmatics. For example, in situations of ongoing local conflicts involving two nationalities—in isolated territories or in villages where deported residents have returned—nationalities continue to be important for various reasons in the perspective of the conflict. What variations of nationality pragmatics exist and how exactly the role of nationalities changes in different environments is a question for future research.

Theory of ethnic dynamics?

The material of the paper and its analysis, however, are also useful from a general theoretical point of view and allow us to look at the problem of ethnic dynamics differently. One of the “trademarks” of constructivism in ethnicity studies is the idea of its “fluidity” and “variability”. But what exactly varies, how exactly does this happen and why? Although a number of important theoretical developments can be indicated in this context[12], there is no comprehensive answer to this question in ethnicity studies. The description created above and the methodology on the basis of which it is made allow us to create a draft model of ethnic dynamics. In other papers (Varshaver, 2024a; 2024b), the author proposed a static, descriptive model that answers the question of what exactly is being studied and discussed when it comes to ethnicity. The general answer to this question is that the center of the discussion and research is the construction of ethnicity, a collective representation organized around categories, but at the same time including a variety of attributes associated with these categories, as well as general ideas about the “nature” and inner workings of ethnic categories. Different elements of the construction of ethnicity, moreover, function differently in different social contexts, to varying degrees regulatory and relevant for them: as mentioned,

[12]The most important such development is the multi-level process model of Andreas Wimmer, which, however, is limited by sociological instruments, and therefore its explanatory power is less than it could be (Wimmer, 2008).

friendships are not regulated by nationalities, but marriages are; in a mountainous village they are hardly ever relevant, while in cities or on the plains they are one of the most important cognitive operators of perception and interaction, etc. Ethnic dynamics in this regard is, firstly, a change in the elements of the construction of ethnicity, and secondly, a change in the set of contexts in which certain elements of the construction of ethnicity are the basis for social or cognitive categorization. In the Dagestani case—if we focus on the given structure—it is possible to state that there exists a degree of erosion of nationalities in terms of their political, administrative and everyday relevance, but the categories themselves continue to exist. This is connected, in general, with the fact that they, ceasing to be useful in one sense (e.g. being worse and worse at predicting behavior), continue to be useful in another (e.g. as a mental "entrance" to history in general). How exactly this is arranged in relation to different contexts and what a full-fledged, refined model of ethnic change and its determinants, created at the intersection of sociology, cognitive science and history, might look like—is up to be answered in subsequent works.

Conclusions and limitations

In general, as has already been said, nationalities continue to be used in Dagestan as a social and cognitive differentiating tool. This is partly due to the fact that the corresponding cognitive and social pragmatics of their use as such are preserved, and partly due to inertia. This conclusion concerns the republic as a whole, and the research methodology was tailored specifically to the possibility of such a generalization. At the same time, a more detailed analysis of locations by type is required to complete the picture. For example, it seems that situations of cohabitation of representatives of two nationalities provide a separate pattern of using nationalities as a tool of social and cognitive organization. In addition, although the given description is relevant for the entire period studied, it is likely that, in addition to modern "erosion", other stages of their existence can be identified. For example, the emergence of national organizations and the introduction of institutions of consociationalism in the first post-Soviet decade could not but change the situation relative to the previous period. Moreover, based on the evidence from the 1960s, it can be assumed with caution that during this period the machinery of nationality reproduction described in the Results section—together with the Soviet trajectories of spatial and social mobility—was only just beginning to take shape. However, both the first and second conclusions require a larger data set and other tools for collecting them. The same applies to spheres in which nationalities play a role, in particular, politics. The list of seven individual "pragmatics" of nationalities is not exhaustive; moreover, some "pragmatics" can be fully manifested only in specific contexts. For example, the "social closure" as the function of ethnic categories in Dagestan is not manifested in general, but can manifest itself in

contexts in which differences in prosperity are superimposed on ethno-categorical ones. Moreover, there is a limitation of the data itself: can memories serve as valid evidence of who said or thought what 60 years ago? This and similar questions are widely discussed within the framework of oral history methodology (Hoffman, 1974; Portelli, 2002; Ritchie, 2014). Such data—in order for the conclusions to be valid—should be supplemented by other data, preferably quantitative, and in this regard, the use of natural language analysis methods is promising. At the same time, however, the study was conceived not only as a way of interpreting the past and present of Dagestan, but also as a possible example of posing a question and organizing an empirical study at the intersection of sociology, cognitive science and history within the framework of the cognitive turn in ethnicity studies. Still both the substantive and theoretical-methodological tasks, formulated for this research in the first place, appear to have been resolved.

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