

Sociocultural Integration and Resolving Identity-based Conflicts in the North Caucasus

Maxim Evgenievich Popov*

Department of Social Philosophy and Ethnology, North-Caucasus Federal University, Russia;
maximus.popov@gmail.com

Abstract

Background/Objectives: The paper is devoted to research of sociocultural integration as a tool for resolving regional identity-based conflicts. The author focuses on the ability of sociocultural integration to de-escalate ethnic tensions and transform destructive identity-based conflicts. **Methods:** A systemic approach to analyzing sociocultural integration, while combining conflict-resolving and neo-functionalistic paradigms, is a methodological basis of this research. A concept of conflict of identities is an important methodological basis at the stage of exploring causes for an increased ethnic tension in the North Caucasus. **Findings:** The need to stimulate the sociocultural integration is caused by evaluative and structural causes: from the ethical point of view, the creation of an inclusive society is a fundamental societal goal; structural factors are related to the need to reduce the differences leading to social fragmentation and escalation of regional conflicts. The author considers systemic factors of identity-based conflicts and emphasizes a destabilizing role of the politicization of ethnicity. Among the structural conditions of the escalation of regional conflicts, the author calls: social inequalities, economic polarization, a contradiction between the system modernization and social disintegration. Discussing anti-conflict mechanisms of sociocultural integration in the North Caucasus, it is necessary to consider the following. Firstly, sociocultural integration is a political project, the content of which is largely determined by issues of security of the multiethnic Russian society. Secondly, the development of the North Caucasus region after the end of armed conflicts shows the inadmissibility of isolationism within the Russian political space. **Applications/Improvements:** Sociocultural integration must serve as a conflict-preventive tool in this context, i.e. a pro-active action on the conflict environment by way of providing structural solutions for regional problems, transforming and rationalizing ethnic contradictions.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Ethnic Conflicts, Ethnic Tension, Identity-based Conflicts, Politicization of Ethnicity, Regional Conflicts, Sociocultural Integration, The North Caucasus

1. Introduction

Investigation of an anti-conflict potential of a sociocultural integration and analysis of adaptation of regional societies to changing conditions of Russian modernization are one of those of highest theoretical and practical relevance. This is due to a fundamental position of the integration issue in social and political sciences and search for new

consolidated resources in the process of de-escalating terrorist threats and overcoming regional identity-based conflicts.

A systemic approach to analyzing sociocultural integration, while combining conflict-resolving and neo-functionalistic paradigms, is a methodological basis of this research. A concept of conflict of identities¹⁻³ is an important methodological basis at the stage of exploring causes

*Author for correspondence

for an increased ethnic tension in the North Caucasus. This allows us to determine regional ethnic conflicts as conflicts of identities that are social in shape (between ethnosocial parties of various levels) and value-oriented in matter, and with ethnicity and cultural differences as their source. The modern theory of resolving ethnic conflicts focuses on a sociocultural integration potential of transforming destructive identity conflicts into constructive interest conflicts.

The concept of identity conflicts appeared for the first time in³ in the 1990-s. The collective identity is considered to be one of basic human needs, while an identity threat is considered as one of basic safety threats by the group³. Moreover, two key needs are distinguished: need of identity and need of safety³. According to⁴, irrationality, deep subjectivity and uncontrollability of identity conflicts are crucial attributes of such conflicts. Motives for ethnic groups to be involved in identity conflicts will affect greatly perspective outcome of such conflicts; for the sake of satisfying their material interests, people would hardly risk their lives consciously. Participation of any parties in identity conflicts exhibits an obvious self-sacrifice, but not an inevitable risk, i.e. readiness to sacrifice for the sake of identification and value ideals is experienced emotionally, acknowledged and verbalized by conflict participants. Ethnic tension escalates in cases, when an ethnocultural group tends to consider itself a 'victim' of value-oriented pretensions of 'other' groups.

A theoretical tradition of investigating sociocultural integration is associated with a conceptual antagonism of theories of ethnic conflict, multiculturalism and neo-functionalism, i.e. the contradiction is in interpreting the essence of integration as a way of de-escalating an ethnic conflict and status of ethnic minorities in pluralistic societies, at the same time conflictologists refer to analysis of conflictogenic nature of the ethnicity, multiculturalists rely on normative of ascriptive ethnic identification, representatives of functional paradigm interpret the status and rights of ethnic groups from the point of equal opportunities and integration imperativeness. According to⁵, a full-fledged theory of ethnic conflict must explain, why ethnic relations that are based on peace and cooperation (integration) are more typical than wide-spread violence, despite serious tensions.

2. Concept Headings

Social disorientation amplifies isolationist tendencies and regionalization of the North Caucasus, while causing anomy, apathy, inactivity, and egging followers of radical ideologies on ethnopolitic and religious extremism. Actualization of anti-conflictogenic mechanisms of sociocultural integration is associated with the necessity to develop a secular and super-ethnic model of macrosocial consolidation that supports cross-ethnic cooperation and cross-cultural dialog. Integration as a process of construing and promoting civic values, identities, institutions and enabling ethnosocial parties to cooperate on a non-conflict basis and according to principles of safety, fairness and equality, becomes the primary method of resolving regional ethnic conflicts.

The specifics of regional conflicts as threats and challenges of integration of the Northern Caucasian society is that they go on against a collision of competing values and ethnic identities. The idea of value-oriented collision clarifies the concept of a regional conflict as a conflict of identities, emphasizing the systemic and genetic nature of this explanatory model. From the structural point of view, regional conflicts appear as an effect of escalation of social inequalities and ethnicity mobilization threatening social safety and integration processes in the polyethnic society.

According to⁶, 'internal conflicts become obviously ethnic. Over half of civil conflicts after the World War II are classified as ethnic or religious. Identification of an ethnic conflict as an anti-governmental rebellion on behalf of an ethnic group is a ground for classifying the regional ethnic conflict'.

The history of domestic conflicts of the second half of the 19th century is reviewed in⁷ and conclusion is made about eclipse of the left-right ideological axis against marked ethnicization of violent challenger-incumbent contests.

3. Discussion

The sociocultural integration is characterized by a tendency towards widening ethnic contacts and dissolving cultural boundaries in modern Russia. Systemic stability and safety of polyethnic regions depend on scopes and

level of a macrosocial solidarity and civic integration. To this effect, a complex analysis of sociocultural integration as a process of value-oriented consolidation, making a high level of civic self-awareness and super-ethnic identification happen for ethnosocial parties, is top priority. According to ⁸, 'the issues of identity construction and social group cohesion on the global level are associated with wide-scale transformations that are predetermined by the transnational capitalism, modernization and globalization. Research in theories of individualism marks out such key processes of social changes as the presence of a certain pressure, targeted identity and individualization policy and personal culture segregation.'

The necessity of stimulating sociocultural integration in a polyethnic society is determined by value-oriented and instrumental reasons, i.e. from the ethic point of view, creation of an integrated 'society for all' is a self-apparent societal goal; structural integration factors are associated with the necessity to narrow down cultural and social differences, leading to social de-fragmentation and affecting adversely modernization processes and ethnic conflict prevention, i.e. the sociocultural integration implies molding a super-ethnic and civic identity.

Sociocultural integration depends on three different, but interrelated factors, such as:

1. Acknowledging pluralism of ethnic identities within the unique normative and legal space.
2. Representing ethnic groups for the purpose of providing a guarantee of their interests being considered in the process of governmental decision-making.
3. Re-distributing economic resources between various ethnosocial parties for the purpose of preventing any social inequalities, polarizations, disproportions, or fragmentations based on an economic status, ethnic and religious identity.

At the macrosocial level, sociocultural integration aims at creating conditions for adaptation of migrants of various categories, based on tolerance and meta-ethnic solidarity. As stated in ⁹, 'integration has become a part of the migration policy in Russia, since 2012, when the Concept of governmental migration policy of Russia up

to 2025 was adopted. It stipulates: 'important elements of the governmental migration policy ... include creating conditions for adaptation and integration of migrants,' while just a few years back the idea of 'integration' was not in the 'lexicon' of the Russian migration policy... At the moment, all prerequisites for stating more ambitious task in the area of migration policy, while focusing not only on labor migration, deportation of non-documented migrants and interception of illegal migration, matured in Russia as a country that is fit with resources. The time has come to mold migration flows and integrate migrant categories that the country needs.'

The theory of integration attempts to combine concepts of an individual freedom and group loyalty as contra-narratives of forced assimilation, which may be considered as a movement towards pluralism and respect of cultural differences at an individual and collective levels. Sociocultural integration forms rational and communicative mechanisms of civic consolidation based on principles of equality and fairness in the ethnonational area. Social fairness, creation of the 'society for all' is an overreaching goal of integration. Fairness is referred to societal principles and values, which make it possible for social parties to gain a fair share of benefit for a fair share of responsibility within their life together in the society. Concepts of social fairness determine a civic society as the most desirable and achievable one, provided that rights and obligations are assigned in accordance with the agreed principles of fairness; it is an integrated society, where social parties may participate in the social, economic and political life on the basis of equality of rights and opportunities, fairness and dignity.

Sociocultural integration policy has social inclusion as its value-oriented and regulatory goal, while implying equal opportunities and rights for all social parties: the system becomes more integrated as a result of implementation of this task, which implies equality and improved life strategies. Integration critics focus on adverse effects of the integration, causing a repressive image of assimilation policy and 'forced' cultural sameness to appear in one's imagination.

Integration issues may be summarized in the following way in the modern scientific discourse:

- 1) sociocultural integration has got a moral and value-oriented imperative and systemic task referring to social progress in the direction of a fairer and equal society;
- 2) conflictogenic factors of social inequalities and economic polarization may be smoothed in the process of sociocultural integration by means of social inclusion of individuals and groups that were previously excluded from certain types of activity;
- 3) in its pursuance of social inclusion, universality and uniformity, the integration policy may level out any values of multiculturalism and principles of cultural diversity; and
- 4) maximum focus on the regulatory goal of the sociocultural integration may interfere with political transformations.

Sociocultural integration reduces ethnic tension, which is associated with a high level of solidarity and safety, attenuation of ethnic mobilization and reduction of a negative stereotypization of 'others' as 'ethnic enemies.' While analyzing the status of ethnicity in dynamics of regional conflicts, one should point out a relation between group identities and primordial values of closed traditional societies, where civic self-awareness and individualism do not play any evident ideological role. Currently, such societies may function in the globalized world by means of preserving their own culture, based on collective values; group identification is correlated within such collectives with ethnic values and religious traditions. According to, an appeal to individual interests cannot patch a crack as a result of a conflict, if we are dealing with an ethnic group-wide collision in the process of conflictology mediation; attempts to manipulate groups may lead to identity conflict intensification.

Regional identity conflicts are a consequence of re-actualization and radicalization of politicized ethnicities. Social inequalities, fragmentations and polarizations serve as systemic factors that determine the acuity of ethnic tension, and escalation of identity conflicts in the North Caucasus as a result. The analysis of relation of proneness to conflict and identity suggests a destructive action of factors of ethnic intolerance and social disintegration on safety of the Northern Caucasian region.

It is argued in ¹⁰ that 'ethnopolitical conflict is not only an armed or political and legal standoff, but a conflict of different historiosophies, historical and cultural values and symbols. This gives rise of a phenomenon of 'competing cultural and historical traditions', most often such antagonism of national or ethnic traditions within a multi-national socium, fight for the 'historical heritage' (constructionists write, not without a reason, that there are not any objective historical facts, they are variational and they are actually a product of interpretation of those with more or less rights to legitimate nomination of such facts) or conflicts between traditions of representatives of different social groups. A bitter rivalry of religious, as well as ethnic traditions is possible in a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic society; opposition of regional traditions, fight for determining the essence of the conflict and establishing causes of such conflict etc. Such 'war of interpretations', fight with the help of one selected subset of historical facts or another becomes a prologue of acute international political conflicts'.

If we want to get successful in discovering causes of identity conflicts, we have to start with a definition that will lead to a valuable theorification and constructive methods of resolving such conflicts. We consider the identity to be a self-perception that is filled with a cultural formulation. The cultural formulation is based on inner needs and preferences, group characteristics and collective values. Identity may be personal, group or cross-group in identity conflicts, however, it is always the source of conflictogenic perception of contradiction and conflict catalyst. The parties may perceive themselves as personal 'maximizers', while protecting individual values, pursuing their own interests and expressing individualistic needs; they may be sociocultural groups and feel like they are a part of collective whole; they may feel like they are carriers of multiple sociocultural identities and get involved in a conflict at the cross-group level. These perceptions are generated by the cultural formulation and identity. 'Identity becomes an ideological basis of parties to the conflict and it is filled with personal, group and cross-group emotions, values and meanings'.

A regional identity conflict has its own unique traits and some of these elements will be more evident than other, nevertheless they all are common denominators of the genesis of such conflict. The primordial approach

helps us explain the conflictogenic nature of ethnicity; the concept of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs explains, how institutional factors and ethnic stereotypes interact. Ethnicity is the embodiment of a powerful emotional stress that may be re-activated, provided the groups are aware of a threat to the ethnicity, values and interests, which leads to ethnification, ethnic intolerance and, ultimately, a violent ethnic conflict.

Identity conflicts are dangerous in the way their genesis and dynamics present social dissatisfaction that is highly likely politicized; and the action of extremism and violence sets implies concentrating an aggressive potential in the point of ethnic intolerance and confessional irreconcilability. The degree of violence in identity conflicts is determined by the intensity of ethnic tension and social dissatisfaction, and scope of institutional support and mobilization being the conditions of an open confrontation.

Conflictogeny of the mobilized ethnicity is stipulated by a negative stereotypization of the 'others' in the process of construing ethnic 'borders'. Cultural differences do not lead to any inevitable identity conflicts, why molding prerequisites to sociocultural integration and inter-ethnic dialog; however, when ethnoconfessional differences are politicized and interpreted as threats to the group safety, identity conflicts that are hard to solve arise. According to ¹⁰, 'if governmental institutes do not take any effort aiming at ensuring communication between ethnic groups and restraining their pretensions, or if they are not capable and do not have any resources to that matter; if they are weak and lack intermediary institutes of the civic society, a risk of acute safety dilemma faced by the conflicting ethnic group rises. Each of the group would expect (whether reasonably or not) for the other group to take advantage of government's weakness and push its 'political agenda'. For the purpose of self-defense, the group will take preventive measures, which may be interpreted by the opposite party as an aggression.'

We may overcome sociocultural disintegration caused by prolonged regional conflicts by a targeted design of integrative civic identity and pluralism and tolerance cultivation. The integration strategy in the Northern Caucasian socium must be built up not on assimilation policy and difference suppression, but on civic solidarity and inter-ethnic cooperation principles. 'Confessional

and national exclusivity turn into specific features that strengthen religious and ethnic identity.' Establishment of tolerant relations in a polyethnic and polyconfessional region is of special importance. Tolerance of things that are 'alien' or 'different' in the Russian country is the subject matter of tolerance and an integral attribute of society democratization. Development of such relations mostly depends on the tolerance rate of citizens in the national and confessional areas¹¹.

4. Conclusion

Ethnic mobilization, social inequalities, economic polarization and civic identity crisis are structural factors that determine the acuity of ethnic tension and escalation of regional identity conflicts as a result. A combat between the modernization system and social disintegration is the primary source of identity conflicts in the North Caucasus. Regionalization takes conflictogenic form in this case, i.e. the specifics of regional conflicts is associated with a conflict of static (traditionalization) and dynamic (modernization) types of social propagation.

Structurally, escalation of violence in regional conflicts is determined by the intensity and scope of ethnic mobilization and social dissatisfaction as necessary conditions of a collision. Regional conflicts affect existentially meaningful collective values and group identities, that is why the participants are involved emotionally into identification conflicts; due to their emotional charge and irrationality, identity conflicts are no longer a means of overcoming social frustrations, but a destructive goal in itself, i.e. ethnicity politization and negative cultural stereotypes in perceiving 'the others' play a key role in initiating such conflicts.

The following must be considered for discussing anti-conflict mechanisms of sociocultural integration in the North Caucasus. First, sociocultural integration is a political project with its content determined to a wide extent by defense challenges of the polyethnic Russian society. Second, development of the North Caucasian region after armed conflicts shows unacceptability and inability of orientation on isolationism of one or another ethnosocial system within the Russian political space.

Integration tasks of ensuring regional safety and overcoming ethnic contradictions in their most destructive

form, which is the conflict of identities, are of systemic all-Russian nature. Sociocultural integration must serve as a conflict-preventive tool in this context, i.e. a pro-active action on the conflict environment by way of providing structural solutions for regional problems, transforming and rationalizing ethnic contradictions.

5. Acknowledgement

This paper has been prepared within the “Sociocultural Integration as a Way of Reducing Ethnic Tensions in the North Caucasus” project, supported with the President Grant MD-7429.2015.6.

6. References

1. Popov ME. Identity-based conflicts in post-traditional Russia: national and regional aspects. Stavropol; 2011.
2. Rothman J, Alberstein M. Individuals, groups and intergroups: understanding the role of identity in conflict and its creative engagement. *Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution*. 2013; 28(3):631–58.
3. Burton J. *Conflict: resolution and prevention*. London; 1990.
4. Rothman J. *Resolving identity-based conflict: In Nations, Organizations, and Communities*. San Francisco; 1997.
5. Fearon J, Laitin D. Explaining interethnic cooperation. *The American Political Science Review*. 1996; 90(4):715.
6. Esteban J, Mayoral L, Ray D. Ethnicity and conflict: theory and facts. *Science*. 2012; 336:858–65. DOI: 10.1126/science.1222240.
7. Brubaker R. *Nationalism reframed: nationhood and the national question in the new Europe*. Cambridge; 1996.
8. Mamedov AK, Yakushina OI. Teoreticheskiye podhody k ponimaniyu identichnosti v sovremennoy sociologicheskoy nauke [Theoretical approaches to the understanding of identity in contemporary social science]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 18. Sociologiya i politologiya Bulletin of the Moscow University. Series 18. Social and Political Science*. 2015; 1:43–59.
9. Riazantsev SV. O yazykovoy integracii migrantov kak novom orientire migracionnoy politiki Rossii [On the linguistic integration of migrants as a new landmark of Russian migration policy]. *Sociologicheskkiye issledovaniya*. 2014; 9:25–9.
10. Achkasov VA. Etnopoliticheskiy konflikt kak sledstvie etnizacii socialnyh problem. [Ethno-political conflict as an effect of ethnization of social problems.] *Politeks*. 2013; 9(2) :41–61.
11. Kublitskaia YeA. Konflitniy potencial mejnacionalnih I etnokonfessionalnih otnosheniy [A conflict potential of cross-national ethno-confessional relations]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 18. Sociologiya i politologiya [Bulletin of the Moscow University. Series 18. Social and political science]*. 2013; 1:91–9.