

***Tatarization of the City:
Ethnocultural Youth Identity Management in Kazan, Tatarstan¹***

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The youth as ‘constructors of the nation’ in postsocialist multicultural societies, such as Tatarstan, are confronted with different identity projects; be it official nation-building discourses or the impact of globalized youth cultures. In this article, the youth are not seen just as consumers of such official or global ‘identity outlines’ but as actors in a public sphere where identities are articulated and negotiated. Offering examples of the visualization of ‘Tatarness’ and ethnocultural boundaries through voice and body by Tatar youth scenes in Kazan, this article aims to analyze the construction of urban Tatar youth culture as a means of the identity management strategies of Tatar youth scenes in order to ‘recapture’ urban (and political) space by a ‘Tatarization of the city’.

Keywords: youth, identity management, ethnocultural representation, Tatarstan

*‘Baltach² will live, Kazan will live, no doubt./
The young Tatars have a flame in their soul, you see./
Try to put it out, ay, ay, ay, you will get your fingers burnt.’*
(from *Tatarlar* by Ilyas Gafarov, Nazim Ismagilov, rap group *Ittifaq*)³

Introduction

Youth making use of urban arenas in order to visualize their ethnocultural collective identities are the subject of many migration studies that investigate identity in the context of social and economic marginalization. This article focuses on the articulation and negotiation of ethnocultural youth identity not in a migration context but in the context of what Will Kymlicka (1995) describes as ‘national minorities’. Reflecting on youth identity-building in postsocialist society (Pilkington et al. 2002), it looks at youth identity representations in the public sphere of postsocialist Tatarstan (Russia), where ethno-national belonging is highly politicized and contested by different nation-building projects.⁴

The outlines of the Tatar youth identity managers in the city of Kazan do not always correspond to the official ideology of ‘civic multiculturalism’ (Derrick 2008: 81), where

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² Baltach: a *rayon* (district) in the North of Tatarstan.

³ Translated from Tatar into Russian by Ilyas Gafarov. All translations of quotes from Russian into English are by A.F.

⁴ In a sense, this can be said to extend to ‘plural worlds’ more generally (Nilan and Feixa eds 2006; Amit-Talai and Wulff eds 1995).

ethnocultural identities are handled in the Soviet tradition of a ‘friendship of the peoples’, whereby ‘nations were to be seen but not heard; [and] culture (...) was to be “national in form but socialist in content”’ (Brubaker 1996: 36). The Tatar youth scenes articulate political claims for recognition and visualization not only in folkloristic frames, such as museums or competitions, but make visible the ethnocultural boundaries in the local youth culture ‘on the street’. The building of a Tatar urban youth culture can be understood as a recapturing of (Russified and Westernized) urban space in terms of a ‘Tatarization of the city’ or, following Helen Faller’s (2002) description of the phenomenon of a symbolic visualization of Tatar culture and history, as part of the process of ‘repossessing Kazan’.

Here, I will argue that the visualization and aesthetization of ‘Tatarness’ by Tatar youth scenes in an urban context is used as a means of identity management and is a boundary making strategy in the face of the perceived threats of ruralization, Russification and globalization against the authenticity of Tatar culture. At the same time, the construction of an urban Tatar youth culture is also used to contest and subvert official state and élite identity politics.

Grasping Youth Collectivities: Youth Scenes as Arenas of Identity Management

Many recent youth studies are oriented towards the increasing fluidity and multiplicity of youth cultural identities and affiliations (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 12). Still, youth research cannot do without concepts of collective identities such as styles (Wulff 1995), youth culture (Sansone 1995) or groups (Mayer 2011). In order to describe the outlines of the youth cultural collective identities articulated and represented in the public sphere, we have to find a concept that takes into account a boundary-making process within a space that is not territorially fixed, but rather functions like a social arena in which identities are constructed and bargained. The concept of *scene* is most useful to grasp youth cultural collectivity and its articulation (Hettlage 1997: 10) in Kazan. *Scene* designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity within a certain set of boundaries but without specifying the nature of these boundaries. Scenes can be shaped by location, by the genre of cultural production and by social activity (Straw 2004: 412).

The articulation of collective identity should not be understood as a unilateral ‘organic’ process but as a contested, bargained and often politicized procedure as, for example, Gerd Baumann (1996) shows in his study on ethnocultural youth identities in Southall (London) drawing on the distinction between a ‘dominant’ and a ‘demiotic’ discourse (on ethnocultural

identities). Strategies of minority groups in Nation-states aimed at gaining recognition and justifying territorial, political and social claims and state strategies aimed at managing cultural diversity and power relations among cultural groups often have been subsumed under the notion of ‘identity politics’ or ‘identity management’. As Robert Hettlage (1997: 11) emphasizes, collective representation can only be successful if it is anchored in society, on a collective level, by a constant identity management (e.g. the introduction of specific institutions, the anchoring of particular themes in the media, historization, musealization and folklorization). The success of this process of construction is guaranteed only when the respective identities are incorporated into the social communication in such a way that they seem to be traditional, unchangeable and not questioned in everyday life. Very often, such identity management is in the hands of the (national) élites, but it can also appear in social movements (Giordano 1996).

Methodological Remarks and Introduction to the Field

The present discussion is based on empirical material collected in the city of Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan.⁵ The main research methods were participant observation and in-depth interviews. I regularly visited youth events (official and unofficial), mostly as an observer but, on occasions, also engaged in direct interaction. I established close everyday contacts with some members of the youth scenes, including joining them in their homes and leisure places. I carried out about 50 semi-structured interviews and four non-guided group discussions with young people involved in youth organizations and scenes.

Tatarstan is territorially and politically embedded in the Russian Federation as a so-called ‘ethnic republic’, a federal subject with the Tatars as the titular nation. According to the 2010 census, 53.3 per cent of the population of 3.78 million define themselves as ethnic (predominantly Muslim) Tatars and 39.7 per cent as ethnic (predominantly Christian-Orthodox) Russians. However, in urban areas the proportion of Russians is often slightly higher than the Tatars’ (for example, in Kazan there are 47.5 per cent Tatars and 48.8 per cent Russians),⁶ which, among other factors, is linked to pre-Soviet and Soviet national policies. The Soviet understanding of ethnicity and territoriality (see Brubaker 1996: 24) was one of the reasons why during the Perestroika period, and especially after the fall of the Soviet

⁵ Fieldwork was conducted between 2007 and 2008. Until 2010 I have periodically updated the ethnography for my Doctoral project.

⁶ These data stem from the 2002 census because the 2010 census data are not yet published in detail.

Union, ethnocultural consciousness increased in many 'ethnic' regions of the Soviet Union and was accompanied in some cases by the formation of nationalist movements.

In the official discourse Tatarstan is presented as a multicultural republic, the fundament of which, namely the Tatarstan people (*tatarstanskiy narod*), is based on a balanced relationship of power between the most dominant ethnocultural groups, the Russians and the Tatars. The city of Kazan is seen as a symbolic mirror of balanced identity politics not only by political actors but also by scholars who understand Kazan as a place where 'Tatar and Russian, Muslim and Orthodox, Eastern and Western and/or Asian and European cultures have existed side by side for centuries' (Gdaniec 2010: 9; see also Graney 2007).

The effects of external ethno-national identity projects in postsocialist Tatarstan society are accompanied by a pluralization of youth identity outlines, mostly influenced by Western youth sub-cultural styles (see Sergeev 1998). On the one hand, 'Western culture' is seen as a symbol of progress and of a new life-style; on the other hand, the idea of 'global culture' has been equated with 'the Americanization of "peripheral" national cultures and economic and political globalization interpreted as a means of subordinating Russia (and the East) to the interests of the West, above all the United States' (Pilkington 2002: xiv, see also Pilkington 1994).

Therefore, the Tatar youth identity management strategies have to be understood in the context of the interplay of civic outlines of nationhood, ethnocultural nation-building processes and the impact of globalized youth sub-cultural styles.

The Making of Tatar Urban Youth Culture

Kazan Youth Identity Managers

As in many other cities, youth cultural belonging in Kazan is very diverse and fragmented. The focus of this study is on youth scenes explaining themselves as representatives of an alternative Tatar youth culture. Most of the members of such scenes are between 18 and 30 years old, are in education or have received a university diploma, often in Tatar linguistics or journalism. Many members are involved in artistic activities such as poetry, music, literature, theatre and cinema. The main scenes are arranged around music groups (for example, the Tatar hip-hop group *Ittifaq*, the Tatar singer *Mubai*, the Tatar rock group *Alqanat* and others), poetry and cultural circles (mainly the *Jaña Dulkan* movement, founded by young Tatar actors and poets), youth organizations (such as *Uzebez*, an association founded by young Tatar journalists or the *Youth Bureau of the World Congress of Tatars*) or circles of friends (such as

Family 16, a self-appointed brotherhood of former students of the Tatar lyceum). Male members dominate many youth scenes, but female poets and journalists do, however, also participate. What links them together ideologically is the aim to ‘maintain the Tatar identity under conditions of globalization and ethnic boundary blurring’ by founding a new alternative urban Tatar youth culture (Press release, *Uzebez* 2007). Physically, the members of these youth scenes are linked only through loose personal networks, without concerted meetings or specific places where they gather regularly, such as the ‘park youth’ in Vienna (Mayer 2011) or youth cultural scenes in Sochi (Kosterina and Andreeva 2010). Gatherings take place spontaneously in different parks or courtyards during the summer and, in winter, in closed places such as the actor’s green rooms in the Tatar theatre after a play, in recording studios where they from time to time record each other, in different cafés and bars or at somebody’s home (if, for instance, the parents are not at home).

Tatar Youth Discourses and Ideologies: Language, Religion and History

Linking to Markowitz (2000) on the interplay of ethnic, religious, civic and gender elements in the identity of urban youth, boundary making strategies are multiple and very diverse among Tatar youth scenes. However, three main strands of discourses are observed: the first is focused on a boundary-making process against the ‘Russian Other’; the second emphasises a Tatar authenticity against globalizing tendencies associated with decadent consumerism and the homogenization of (youth) culture; a third strand of discourse has been developed by Tatar urban youth to distinguish a reflective ethnocultural consciousness of enlightened urban youth from a folklorized and ‘ignorant’ rural set up. Of course, these youth discourses about an authentic Tatar culture are strongly influenced by the ethno-nationalist discourse that underlines three constituting factors of ‘Tatarness’: language, religion and history (see, for example, Rorlich 1999). It is not so surprising, therefore, to see these factors playing a central role in the image of an authentic Tatar urban youth.

In Soviet times (and before), Tatar language and culture were banned from the cities in favour of the Russian language, and Tatarness was associated with backwardness and rurality — better hidden in public. However, with the growing ethnocultural consciousness of the ‘Tatar people’, the recapture of the urban space (meaning also political space) became part of nationalist ideology. The fight against ‘Russification’ is, thus, one of the most dominant topics in Tatar youth discourses: ‘If you don’t know your mother tongue, then you lose the

link to your ancestors, you lose your roots and become a Mankurt⁷ (Azat, 24 years, 2008). The use of the Tatar language in everyday life as well as in public spaces, such as schools, universities and the media, is assiduously propagated by Tatar youth identity managers, as illustrated, for example, by the *Min tatarça söiläşäm* (I speak Tatar) action. This is a street event that includes concerts, flash mobs, speeches and competitions and is organised by Tatar youth scenes once a year on April 26th, the birthday of the Tatar national poet Gabdulla Tukay (1886-1913); all those 'who are not indifferent to the fate of the Tatar language and the whole Tatar culture' are invited.⁸ Furthermore, it has become popular among male representatives of the Tatar youth scenes in Kazan to 'de-Russify' their family names so that Karimov becomes Karim, Batullin becomes Battulla and Zayniev becomes Zayni.

In Tatarstan, religious affiliation is strongly linked to discourses of ethnocultural boundary-making, especially among the young (see e.g. Hodžaeva and Šumilova 2003). Although there are Tatar youth ethnocultural identity outlines that do not refer to Islam (see Friedli 2010; Khodzhaeva 2011), certain features of a Muslim life-style and traditions are integrated into Tatar youth identity discourses. Many youth identity managers refer to a pre-revolution enlightened Tatar-Muslim urban culture. Rifat, one of the founders of the *Uzebez* movement, explains that Tatar urban *intelligentsiya* was systematically destroyed at the beginning of the Soviet era and, in order to revive a Tatar urban culture, one has to remember the Tatar-Muslim enlightenment movement at the end of the 20th century (Rifat, 29 years, informal conversation 2008). In this discourse, the historical image of the pre-revolutionary *shaqird*, a *medrese* student, embodies the values of an educated, open-minded but culturally rooted contemporary Tatar youngster.

⁷ A *Mankurt* is a figure from a legend in the novel *I dol'she veka dlitsya den'* (The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years) by the Kyrgyz writer Džingiz Aytmatov (1980) and describes a person who forgot his roots and lost the link to his ancestors. The notion is used among Tatar youth in a pejorative way in order to describe Russified Tatars.

⁸ Homepage of Uzebez: www.uzebez.org (last accessed 27 April 2012).



Fig. 1: A young Tatar dancer performing the '*shaqird dance*'. From the performance '*Bie, bie, Khaybulla*' (Dance, dance, Khaybulla), by Ilgiz Zayniev, with Nurbek Batulla, 2010. Photo courtesy of Tabriz Yarullin.

In the ideology of the young urban Tatar, Islam and religious consciousness are stressed as important aspects of urban Tatarness. One should follow the Tatar Muslim life-cycle rituals (*sünnet, nikakh*), men should ideally go to the mosque on Fridays (but it is not imperative to pray *namaz* five times a day), people should avoid eating pork (the taboo is less strict regarding alcohol) and should follow the Muslim norms of hygiene. In most cases, Muslim values are embedded into an understanding of Tatar tradition as opposite and morally superior to Russian cultural norms, especially concerning family relationships. Quotes from informants help to clarify this point. Aydar, a twenty-year old man, said, 'In the Tatar family it is the husband on whom the family is based. The wife gives the family shelter (...) In Russian families you can meet women labouring while their husbands sit at home drunk...'. Ilyas, a twenty-three-year old man, remarked, '...they can even beat their wives. In Islam the beating of the wives is strongly condemned'.⁹

Moreover, an urban Tatar youth should have a reflexive approach to 'the history of his people'. Such a 'reflexive approach' is further nurtured through informal excursions to historical places in the old Tatar district in Kazan (*Starotatarskaya sloboda*) or through attending gatherings and youth scenes in the vicinity of historical monuments. As I have mentioned with reference to language, the link to the ancestors is seen as one of the key factors that would help to maintain Tatar culture in the future. This very link is also mobilized

⁹ Ilyas emphasized the harmonic and equal relationship between man and woman in the Muslim family.

by Tatar youth scenes in order to visualize their ethnocultural belonging and to articulate their claims in the public sphere, as exemplified by the yearly *häter köne* (remembrance day) in mid-October. Together with older activists and representatives of the Tatar national movement of the 1990s, members of Tatar youth scenes demonstrate in front of the *Suyumbike* tower¹⁰ in remembrance of the Tatar soldiers who died in the fight against the troops of Ivan IV, who conquered Kazan in 1552. Members of the Tatar youth scenes walk with banners bearing inscriptions like ‘The youth, too, is mourning’ or ‘We want independence’, and organize collective prayers and speeches and concerts in honour of their forefathers.

Representation and Visibility of Belonging in Public Space: Voice and Body on the Internet and on the Street

Tatar youth identity managers set the ideological standard of Tatar urban youth culture, but how is this collective identity made visible and ‘anchored’? The *voice* and the *body* are the two main vehicles for the public visibility of ethnicity for Tatar youth scenes in Kazan. By voice, I mean the verbal articulation of identity in the public space and its recognition and reception in society. By body, I mean the symbolic expression of identity through the body, with reference to Hebdige’s (1979) description of the expression of style by British youth subcultures. The articulations of Tatar urban youth identity and the connected political claims usually take place in (virtual or physical) public spaces, such as on the Internet, street events, youth performances and leisure arenas (particularly, music festivals and city youth concerts).

For the Tatar youth scenes, the public space on the Internet is a very important arena for the representation and negotiation of collective identity. Ethnocultural cyber networks can be seen as powerful arenas that channel common interests and identity-building strategies (see, for example, Leung 2005). Tatar youth scenes represent themselves and their ideas through virtual groups in Internet communities, such as *vkontakte.ru* (see also Suleymanova 2009) and *facebook.com*, as well as in blogs. The ‘followers’ of these groups and blogs share ideas and orient themselves according to standards set in the forums and in discussions. The Tatar youth scenes in Kazan have their own virtual groups, where they announce forthcoming events, launch issues to be discussed within the community and post music and videos.

¹⁰ According to the legend, Suyumbike was the last empress of the Kazan Khanate, conquered by Ivan the Terrible in 1552. She is said to have chosen to commit suicide by jumping from a tower rather than to fall into the hands of the Russian enemy.

Another form of articulation of collective identity is *style* (see Hebdige 1979). The visualization of ‘Tatarness’ in clothing and fashion has become an important element in the identity management of urban Tatar youth. This not only involves wearing the *Ichigi* (traditional Tatar leather boots with beautiful decorations) or Tatar and/or Muslim headwear (such as *Tubeteyka* or *Papakha* for boys and *Kalfak* and Muslim headscarf for girls), but also T-Shirts with inscriptions like *100% Tatar kızı* (‘100% Tatar girl’) or *100% Tatar malae* (‘100% Tatar boy’), *Öçpoçmak aşatam, R’n’B jaratam* (I eat *öçpoçmak*¹¹ and love R’n’B) or even *Min Ivanny jaratmım. Suyumbike* (I don’t like Ivan. Suyumbike). As the designers of T-Shirts state on their homepage, this style represents Tatar youths ‘who keep up with the times without forgetting their roots’.¹²



Fig. 2: Two members of *Uzebez* with *papakha*, headscarf and *ichigi* at the ‘*Min tatarça söiläşäm*’ action, April 2011. Photo courtesy of Marat Bayramgulov.

Music as a form of expression of youth style and identity in ethnocultural terms is represented in many studies on migrant youth (Mayer 2011, Baumann 1996). For the urban Tatar youth scenes, music and ‘going out’ serve as a delimitating markers from popularized rural Tatar youth culture (for example, Tatar discos) ‘imported’ into the city by young people from the so called *rayony* (the countryside districts of Tatarstan), who moved to the capital in order to study or work. To the Tatar urban youth scenes, their events are pure entertainment and focused on Tatar *popsa*.¹³ On the contrary, the alternative urban Tatar youth organize the so-called *Uzäk* parties, held in the Tatar language. These series of parties promise to be the ‘total opposite to the infamous Tatar discos’, do not play Tatar *popsa* and have no Tatar pop

¹¹ A triangular Tatar traditional pastry, filled with minced beef, onion and potatoes.

¹² <http://dressaytam.com/static/about>, last accessed 25 March 2012

¹³ This is a Russian word that stems from the English word ‘pop’. It is used by young people to describe (with a slightly pejorative connotation) mainstream commercial popular music and culture.

star performances, but only ‘high standard DJs and live Tatar alternative music’ (Press release by *Uzäk* party organizers, 2007). Or as a Tatar ‘alternative’ musician explains, ‘Our work is more intellectual than what you hear in the Tatar ‘estrada’¹⁴. In this sense, we are more... traditional than the Russian pop scene (...) in terms of form as well as content. On the level of the content, we try to propagate something more intellectual, something that makes people think. In terms of form, we chose something simple: Hip-Hop, R’n’B...this seems to be the most youthful form, which is developing very quickly and is most understandable to the youth. We grew up in this culture and thus we can best express our thoughts in this form. The content [of our songs], however, very much diverges from Western or Russian [songs]; you feel the influence of the Tatar classics.’ (Nijaz, Tatar rapper, 21years, 4 September 2008).



Fig. 3: *Ittifaq*, Tatar rap group, gig at the festival ‘*Tatarstan supergood*’ in Kazan, July 2011. Photo courtesy of Ruslan Zakirov.

To sum up, the Tatar youth identity managers do not open museums or build monuments in order to anchor their ideas about Tatariness. Instead, they create groups on the Internet, organize public events and visualize Tatar urban youth identity through fashion symbols.

Conclusion

In postsocialist Tatarstan, the young see themselves confronted with multiple ideologies of the state, while the national élites see them both as the ‘bearers of the nation’, in the civic terms of a *Rossian* ‘citizen in the making’, and, in ethnocultural terms, as the prospects for a

¹⁴ *Estrada* is a Russian word that describes popular-entertaining scenic art.

revival of a 'lost' Tatar culture. The role of the ethnocultural factor in youth nation-building projects has been emphasised by Fran Markowitz (2000), who reflects on the concepts of an ethnic *russskiy* and a civic *rossiyskiy* nation in the identity outlines of urban youth in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Dzerzhinsk, and on the complex interplay of different aspects, such as ethnicity, religion and gender. Furthermore, in order to study youth identity-building in a postsocialist context, we need to take into account the influences of state institutions and élite ideologies at federal and regional level, as well as the effects of globalizing tendencies (Blum 2007). However, as shown by other studies on youth in postsocialist societies (Pilkington et al. 2002), as well as in 'plural worlds' in general (Nilan and Feixa eds 2006; Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995), the youth do not have to be understood as victims of (official and unofficial) identity projects and as consumers of global youth culture, for they are reflective actors who develop their own outlines of identity-management borrowing, contesting or subverting external (adult) offers of identity.

A notable characteristic of the construction of the urban Tatar culture is the formulation of political claims of recognition in what is perceived to be a 'Russified' environment; yet, not only are the young urban Tatars conscious of their roots and standing in clear demarcation towards the Russian 'other', they are also critical towards Western mass culture and consumerism, meaning the above-mentioned *Amerikanizacija* (Pilkington 2002: xiv). Of course, elements of what may be called global youth culture have an influence on the life-style of the Tatar youth. However, Tatar identity-managers emphasize that Tatar hip-hop music, for example, should not be understood as a Tatar version of Western music, but rather as Tatar culture packed into a youthful (global) form or, in other words, as 'global in form but national in content'.

Therefore, the Tatar urban youth see the city not as a *cosmopolis* where identities are merged and multiplied and boundaries blurred but as a place of distinction and competition for recognition. This is why their project is a 'Tatarization of the city', as well as an 'urbanization of Tatariness'. Tatar urban youth scenes in Kazan may not be seen as 'national archipelagos', as Aurora Alvarez Veinguer (2007) says in her description of Tatar schools in Kazan, but, rather, as a 'search for Tatar roots' that is determining the articulation of their identities.

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