Identity-Based Conflicts in the Security Discourse: the Case of Russia

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Abstract. The interest in the concept of identity-based conflict has been increasing worldwide during the first decade of the 21-st century. Identity became a prism for studying the problem of security in multi-ethnic communities. A rapid strengthening of ethnic identity of the citizens of Russia occurred in two post-Soviet decades. It was mainly manifested in the demands of ethnocentrism, national-cultural autonomy, secession, as well as in the substantial growth of tension in ethnic relations which resulted in protracted identity-based conflicts, conflicts of values, paradigms and interpretations. Identity-based conflicts have become a considerable obstacle to the Russian modernization project in the current decade. Such conflicts are characterized by destructive power, it is difficult to manage, resolve and settle them. The participants of identity-based conflicts cannot rationalize the situation and often experience difficulty in explaining the reasons of their personal actions. The reduction of the role of civil identification, the growth of ethno-religious consciousness, new realities in ethnic and political life, new global rivalries, unstable processes of modernization in Russian society were significant factors of the emergence of a large number of identity-based conflicts and social instability. The interest in the concept of identity-based conflict has been increasing worldwide during the first decade of the 21-st century. Identity became a prism for studying the problem.

Key words: identity, identity-based conflicts, social security, ethno-nationalism, traditionalism, modernization, Russia, the North Caucasus

Threats and challenges to the social and political security of modern Russia and the risks of destabilization of social and political institutions are to a large extent linked to identity-based conflicts. Such conflicts are caused by the effects of globalization and regionalization of civic and ethnic cultures (glocalization), and eruption and transformation of state ideologies. Ambivalent processes of conflict and consolidation based on active changes of macro-social identities are typical for periods of radical structural transformations of societies. We are the witnesses of the emergence and decline of many civic and ethno-regional identities in the modern world. Rapid changes
in identities threaten the integrity of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic states. Thus the category of identity became an important point of national security.

Identity-based conflicts are a notable phenomenon in the post-traditional world where rational and irrational features fancifully intertwine in politics, culture and everyday life of common people. Thus a complex interpretation of reality is produced, partly rational and adequate, partly mythologized. This interpretation transforms into social and political action. In this case, the post-traditional identity is a normative element of perception of the multicultural dialogue.

The term "identity-based conflicts" appeared in the works of J. Burton and J. Rothman in 1990s. In John Burton's works identity is regarded as one of the basic human needs, and the perceived threat to cultural identity of a group is regarded by group members as a major threat to their security. In this aspect two fundamental needs - the need for identity and the need for security – were outlined by J. Burton. According to J. Burton, existing tensions might potentially evolve into deep-rooted conflicts that rest on underlying needs that cannot be compromised, and where interests and positions are deemed non-negotiable.

In J. Rothman's studies the essential element of conflicts of identities is human subjectivity. According to J. Rothman, in identity-based conflicts, where the main issues are often threatened or frustrated needs and values, deep internal consensus may be forged around such needs and values. Methodological ideas, important for the study of social and cultural identities and identity-based conflicts in Russian regions, were offered by V. Avksentiev and A. Dmitriev.

Identity-based conflicts reflect acute controversies in collective values shared by the parties involved into conflicts. Such conflicts in the post-traditional world are mainly

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related to the resistance to integration of developing countries into the global system of transnational communication. Identity-based conflicts are nowadays one of central ideas of the theory of conflict transformation and conflict resolution. Social and cultural identities – religious, ethnic, racial, cultural – are the ground for groups of people to come into conflict. Unlike conflicts of interests, identity-based conflicts are hardly soluble. Another problem is participation of mediators, facilitators and other third-party actors. Their intervening into such conflicts is in most cases regarded by the parties involved in conflict as abetting.

Motives for participation of individuals and groups in identity-based conflicts are very important for the assessment of the perspectives of conflict resolution; in order to satisfy their material interests people are unlikely to risk their lives. But there are many cases where participation in a conflict is more or less pronounced as a sacrifice but not an imminent risk; sometimes willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of any lofty ideals is clearly recognized or verbalized by the parties of identity-based conflicts. The growth of ethnic conflicts in Russia occurs when ethnic groups tend to perceive themselves as victims of value claims of other ethno-religious and ethno-political groups, i.e. in the situation of awareness of a threat to group security.

In this aspect, an adequate identification of mechanisms of identity-based conflict initiation and the involvement of new members are the path for forecasting and early warning of conflicts. Identity-based conflicts do not always fit into the simple cognitive schemes. According to Rothman, one of the attributes of the identity-based conflict is its “elusiveness”. In other words, such a conflict is deeply subjective; rivals found in an identity-based conflict sometimes can hardly explain the nature of their rivalry. When the conflicting parties describe their controversial issues in terms of history, of events or significance, an outside observer may hear very different stories. The fact that one side presents as a struggle for freedom, the other presents as a terrorism.

In this regard, the most appropriate way of conflict management in the situation of identity-based conflicts is cultural integration on the basis of democratic institutions and civic identity, the mutual recognition of the importance of equality of basic needs and fundamental values of each of the parties and joint solution of common problems.

The social and political security of Western countries is based on a certain socio-cultural basis that is the stable identification with the Western world, with Western

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5 Rothman, 1997.
civilization. Such identity can be shattered only in a case of dramatic changes in the Western world, the changes that are most unlikely at present time. The emerging supranational and supra-ethnic identities only consolidate the Western identity.

Situation is different in Russia. Russia is a typical country where identity-based conflicts play a great role in political and social life. This can be explained by two main reasons. Firstly it is the legacy of the break-up of the Soviet Union that resulted in the decline of the Soviet identity. Secondly, it is the priority of the development of present-day Russia. Such priority is modernization that includes not only economic modernization, but political and cultural modernization as well. Political and cultural modernization is connected with the success in reaching two goals: de-traditionalization of Russia and de-escalation of identity-based conflicts.

The disappearance of Soviet identity was a real cultural catastrophe of the 1990-es. Ordinary people could not understand who they were and where was their place in the world. Russian civic identity was practically non-existent at that time. This was a serious threat to social security underestimated by the then authorities. Russia's political space remained highly conflict-generating for at least for a decade mainly due to the incompleteness of the supra-ethnic Russian civil identity. It remains unstable up to now, though certain progress is obvious. Overcoming the post-Soviet identity crisis was not included into the priorities of the first generation of post-Soviet reformers of the early Romantic period of Russian transition: it was considered sufficient to destruct the Soviet identity. It should be noted that the Russian identity remains largely post-Soviet, i.e. transitional identity. The post-Soviet identity that was formed in the first half of the 1990s was and could be only a conflict identity.

Russia's society has gone through several stages of transformation of the policy of identity since 1991. The first was the mentioned above 'romantic period' of Russia's reforms, the stage of orientation to Western values and social institutions and the denial of all Soviet. That period was characterized by the belief that Russia would be integrated into the Western world as an equal partner quite soon, would build a society of the Western type and join the political structures of Western civilization within a short historical period. It should be noted that this strategy still has many adherents among Russia's political and intellectual elite despite its obvious failure.

The second stage was characterized by distancing of a significant part of intellectual elite from the Eurocentric scheme, the growing popularity of neo-Eurasianism, the emergence of ideas of ethnic nationalism, isolationism and
“reasonable self-sufficiency” as a defensive reaction to the changing situation in the world in the second part of the 1990s. This period can be described as a crisis of the Western vector of Russian identity.

The first decade of the 21st century was characterized by a new search of an integral Russian identity, which should be based on its own foundation and at the same time reflect the realities of the 21st century. This was the third stage of the formation of a new Russian identity. None of these projects were realized.

The religious renaissance of the 1990-s produced a number of negative phenomena in the post-Soviet Russia: the emergence of ethno-religious fundamentalism and extremism, the participation of religious leaders in political and electoral processes, the use of the confessional factor for ethno-political mobilization, the use of Islamic rhetoric by ethnic separatists that led to the perception of ethnic crisis in public opinion in the terms of a religious conflict. A major problem for the stability of Russia's society up to now are not so much contradictions between confessional groups as contradiction within confessional groups (for instance, between ‘traditional’ Islam and the Wahhabis).

The religious factor of traditionalist renaissance in Russian society became one of the most important instruments of ethnic mobilization. Constant appeals of politicians, public and social figures to religion resulted in more tangible forms of cultural differences, and the act of religious identification quite often is not the result of spiritual search, but is an act of socio-cultural identification. In this case, the religious factor, not being a potential source of identity-based conflicts by itself, may play an important role in forming the grounds for identity-based conflicts.

The interest of Russian citizens in religion is due to two major trends: 1) the increasing importance of religious identities on the background of a relative reduction of the role of ethnic identity in the first decade of the 21st century; 2) the wide spread of the anomalies of socio-cultural subjectivity. In the context of a protracted identity crisis of Russian society there is a need for real or symbolic compensation for the loss of stable identities of the past. Sometimes, especially on a personal level, religious renaissance results in the extreme forms of religious fanaticism, intolerance and aggression against the atheists and people of other faiths (‘infidels’). And while the probability of conflicts that can be correctly identified as religious (sectarian) is small, the escalation of tensions in the poly-confessional Russia's regions is quite possible in different directions: either inside one religion among its denominations and groups or between
different religions or between religious and secular world. Fundamentalism seeks to establish and maintain the basic non-negotiable criteria for “true” ethno-religious identity.

At the same time, there are other vectors of the construction of collective identities: European identity, regional identity (the orientation on new regional centers of stable growth) and ethno-national (ethno-political) identity. Such abundance in options of identification resulted in the absence of stable identities by the end of 1990-s and serious social and political instability in the country. All those types of identities are highly competitive, and if the ethno-religious identities in modern Russia are a fait accompli, European and regional identities are not formed yet. Thus several identification projects exist in Russia not only diachronically (the above-mentioned three stages of Russia’s identity policy), but synchronically as well. Such situation only hinders the formation of modern Russian civil identity.

It is important to underline, that the political elite of Russia has surely made its choice: it is Western and European identity. It is not so obvious among ordinary people. Russia is a country with great regional differences and, though most of the population lives in the European part of the country, people outside Moscow, Saint Petersburg and less than a dozen of other largest cities feel little reference to Western or European values and do not see themselves as a part of the Western world.

One of the regions of Russian Federation where identity-based conflicts are wide spread is the North Caucasus. It is the region where different civilizations meet, synchronically and diachronically. Traditional socio-cultural communities that define the social landscape of the North Caucasus cannot come to a compromise about their identities and group values. The way to alter this situation is the construction and maintenance Russian civic identity based on non-ethnic affiliations thus eliminating or substantially reducing intolerance as negative stereotyped images of "others" and the rejection of otherness.

Identity-based conflicts in the North Caucasus are substantially determined by the general crisis of cultural identity in Russia. But the specific feature of such conflicts in that region is that they reflect the controversy between traditionalism and modernity. Traditionalism became a serious obstacle to economic and social development and a source of many tensions and conflicts. The process of revivalism of radical ethnicity of the 1990-s in the North Caucasus is still acting as a conflict producing factor. Collective rights for a traditional way of life are supported by public opinion and intellectuals.
In the North Caucasus the radical ethno-nationalism that initiates identity-based conflicts, reveals the institutional degradation of civil culture and destabilization of regional democratic process. Civil affiliations and responsibility are replaced by mobilization of reactive traditionalism; the religious fundamentalism becomes the most important tool of the disputed activity. Remaining unresolved, regional ethno-political conflicts that have begun as the conflicts of interests, turn into conflicts of identities thus generating and perpetuating violence. The probability of their solution in future decreases substantially and such conflicts very often transform into protracted conflicts. The escalation of identity-based conflicts and their transformation into armed clashes is a serious threat to stability not only in the Caucasian region, but in Russia as a whole.

The North Caucasian region is characterized both by "realistic" conflicts and 'non-realistic' conflicts that is the conflicts of identities. The latter tend to transform into forced conflicts-clashes. Besides, identity-based conflicts in the North Caucasus are characterized by traditional and affective type of social interactions, and also by absence of “real objectiveness” that transform those conflicts into emotionally loaded and resistant to management. Such conflicts become a value and a means at the same time. Thus negative cultural stereotypes are a serious obstacle to an open dialogue, despite multiple initiatives and declared intentions.

Traditional cultural identity is expressed in a high-level symmetry between objective and subjective realities. As a result we can see ‘strong’ identifies in traditional societies, based on tribal, clan or ethnic (primordial) identities or more complex but still very prescriptive religious identity. Ethno-religious identities in traditional societies become “socially predefined”, totalitarian in their content. Communal person within ethno-clan is the subject of total control of his social and political behavior. The process of personal identification is replaced by socially significant positions of “a man with genuine religious or ethnic identity” and unified social roles. Any threat to such identities can bring to a conflict.

The systemic crisis caused by protracted identity-based conflicts at regional level can be overcome by deliberate designing of integrative civil identity, cultivation of such major elements of civil culture, as democratization, transparency, rationalization.

The formation of the civil identity can help to create stable relations between cultural groups in multiethnic Russian regions. Civil identity creates conditions for reduction of the uncontrolled, ‘non-unrealistic’ conflicts of identities and their transformation into soluble "realistic" conflicts of interests. Overcoming identity-based
conflicts in Russia depends on an active civic stand, and on not only legal status of a person, but also on his/her ability to sociocultural integration on the basis of civil cooperation and cultural dialogue. Russia is in a sharp need of a new model of internationalism.

Civic identity in contemporary Russia can become the foundation of “provention” of identity-based conflicts (in the concept of J. Burton)\(^6\), which means that an adequate explanation of the phenomenon of conflict should include human factors and not only the conditions that are ‘in charge’ of a conflict, as well as structural changes necessary to resolve the conflict, thus changing the cultural environment from confrontation to cooperation. Burton meant primarily “horizontal” relationships, i.e. dialogue and cooperation of actors or conflict parties; thus, according to J. Burton, a detailed analysis of conflict and expansion of strategies requires the involvement of new actors. They can be civil society organizations, educational, scientific institutions, diverse groups of “civil mediation” and “civic diplomacy”\(^7\).

Specific features of identity-based conflicts in the North Caucasus are determined by acute contradiction between two models of development: the static model, based on ethno-religious traditionalism and dynamic model, based on the idea of secular modernization. These conflicts are connected with political mobilization of ethnic and religious identities. The ethno-religious hierarchy as a factor of identity-based conflicts in the North Caucasus becomes a source of creation of new traditionalist projects of fundamentalism. The processes of modernization in the region develop asymmetrically, and this strengthens identity-based tensions and conflicts.

One of the factors, that make those conflicts more acute in the North Caucasus, is social and ethno-social exclusion. Other factors are economic fragmentation (“shadow” economy and ethnic division of labor, high level of corruption), the disintegration of social space of the region act. During the last 12 years traditionalism and regionalization in the North Caucasus acquired the more and more conflict producing character, thus threatening the system of social and political security in the region.

Ethno-political processes in the Northern Caucasus in the first decade of the 21\(^{st}\) century changed the nature of threats to regional, national and social security of

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\(^7\) Ibid.
Russia in comparison with the early and mid-1990s. At the beginning of the 21st century there was a de-escalation of armed ethnic conflicts but radical ethnic nationalism that produces terrorism and regional conflicts is still very active. Extremism and terrorism led to institutional degradation and destabilization of modest sprouts of civic culture and democratic processes in the region. According to V. Avksentiev and A. Dmitriev, “the North Caucasus is an important and integral part of Russia's (Rossiyan) civilization, one of its “cornerstones”; the problems of the region will affect the fate of the entire country. In addition, attention should be paid to the local hotbeds of ethno-political and ethno-social tensions, the correct identification of existing tensions and proactive elimination of the causes. The emergence and escalation of a definite conflict is based on a certain basis of the conflict, which includes a number of objective and subjective factors, in particular, a problem that gave a rise to social tensions, 'carriers' of the problem who gradually transform into conflict participants, the various players looking to get their benefits from participation in the conflict”8.

Identity-based interaction in post-traditional world implies ambiguous, contradictory and even diametrically opposite effects on the same political, cultural and historical contexts. On the one hand, the identity-based interactions contribute to the development of civic consciousness, increasing the social importance of an individual and the level of political rights and freedoms. On the other hand, when such interactions transform into identity-based conflicts they threaten the security of civil societies.

Conflict-generating character of group identities in present-day Russia should be considered in the context of forming a new national security system as an integral part of the global security. Despite the fact that attempts to build a new collective identity did not bring to a sufficient result, the main positive result of the post-communist reform is the realizing of the fact, that social and cultural identities are critically important for the creation of a modern system of social and political security. Construction of civic identity that meets the challenges of humanitarian security in a rapidly changing world is one of the key tasks of Russia's society on the path to democratization and modernization.

Bibliography


