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Ethnicity in the City: Tatar Urban Youth Culture in Kazan, Tatarstan

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Abstract
In this article, the city and the urban space shall be understood as a political platform, where identities and powers are bargained, and as a screen on which they are projected. In this context, I will reflect on the strategies of identity management 'from below' employed by Tatar young people in Kazan and on their attempt to build a 'Tatar urban youth culture'. These identity strategies are mainly oriented against the 'Russian other', a decadent consumerist West and an ignorant rural Tatar culture and their main issue is the 'repossessing' of Kazan and the Tatarisation of the city. Such strategies namely include the use of the Tatar language in predominantly Russophone public spheres, the introduction of Tatar folkloristic elements in music and fashion as well as the appeal to a (lost) Tatar urban culture associated with an enlightened approach to Islam and to the pre-revolutionary Tatar intelligentsia. Tatar youth scenes thus use ethnicity as a resource in the linguistic, religious, historic and cultural (re)appropriation of the urban space, which in turn has to be understood as a symbolic political act in a specific historical as well as 'glocal' context. Thus, this article can be seen as a contribution to a critical approach towards cosmopolitanism introducing alternative concepts to reflect relationships, norms and values in urban life.

Keywords
Identity management, urban youth cultures, ethnicity, appropriation of urban space, Tatarstan

In the anthropological literature it is broadly agreed that the city can (or should) be conceptualised as a political space. In this perspective, the urban built environment can be seen as a discursive realm, as is the case with Jane Jacobs' concept of representational city (1993); but the city (especially the capital city) can also be viewed as the place where élite groups are formed, power is bargained and decisions are taken.

The present discussion is based on empirical material collected between 2007 and 2010 in the city of Kazan[1]. The city of Kazan exemplifies how the city as a spatial concept can be understood as a political platform. This is a post-socialist, multi-ethnic, poly-confessional city and the regional

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capital of the Republic of Tatarstan in the Russian Federation. In 1995, the former president of the republic, Mintimer Shaimiev,[2] launched two architectural projects in the Kazan Kremlin in preparation of the thousand year anniversary of the city in 2005. One of these projects involved the construction of the Kul Sharif Mosque; it is believed that it was most probably located within the walls of the Kremlin before the invasion of Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century. The other project was the renovation of the Annunciation Cathedral, built by Ivan the Terrible after his conquest of Kazan, but destroyed and used as an archive in Soviet times. These two architectural projects in the city planning of Kazan cannot be understood only in the context of the architectural upgrading of the city centre or of historical memory. They are highly political acts at a time of post-socialist nation-building.

However, we should not assume that the political and economic élite are the sole 'identity managers' in the urban and national realm. The city is a place where the urban (public) space is always contested among different groups in their presentation of the collective self, to paraphrase Goffman (1959). In this article, I would like to reflect on the strategies of identity management in public urban space employed by Tatar young people in Kazan and on their attempt to build a 'Tatar urban youth culture'. As we shall see, the main issue is the 'repossessing' of Kazan and the Tatarisation of the city. Many works on urban youth cultures, such as Danila Mayer's study of Vienna youth (2011), focus on the appropriation of physical urban spaces and places. Here, I do not follow this trend. Instead, I examine the attempt of (re)tatarisation of the city as a symbolic political act which has to be understood in a specific historical context as well as in the context of what Roland Robertson calls 'glocalization', the simultaneous tendencies of homogenisation and heterogenisation, of universalism and particularism (Robertson, 1995: 27). In this line, I shall argue that the reappropriation of urban space cannot be understood only in the context of a nation-state, but also as a (re)appropriation of a space contested by globalising tendencies (see also Friedli, 2012).

Conceptual discussion: ethnicity in the city

The city is often understood as the epitome of the evils of modernisation, but also as a place for a society of equals, a place 'bestowing identity that ideally transcends ethnic and cultural differences and social divisions' (Pardo & Prato, 2012: 5); a place for *civitas*, civil society and cosmopolitanism. Today, cosmopolitanism is upheld as a common and desirable urban trait, as an epiphenomenon of the desire to participate in global practices that are often seen as both necessary and inevitable. Thus, the city is increasingly seen as hub or a node in global networks and processes that effectively remove it from its national context and undermine its national loyalties (Humphrey & Skvirskaja, 2012: 3). Recently, however, scholars have critically pointed to the 'fragility of cosmopolitanism' (Humphrey & Skvirskaja, 2012: 1) and to the need to study the new kinds of relations that are being formed today in the nationalistic contexts of what they call post-cosmopolitan cities, or what Appadurai (2000) has defined through the term de-cosmopolitanisation in his study of how the global city Bombay changed into the more intolerant, xenophobic Mumbai.

It is not my aim in this article to discuss processes of de-cosmopolitanisation or reflect on the cosmopolitan character of a city. I understand the city neither as a place of de-territorialised identities nor as a place of xenophobia and conflict, but as a political platform, where identities and powers are bargained, and as a screen on which they are projected. I do not see the city as a political setting for the dissolution of hierarchical ethnic and class principles but, rather, as a place where ethnic communities tend to congregate and generate intellectual, political and economic élites. This can even lead to what Yiftachel and Yacobi (2003) call 'urban ethnocracy'. In their study on the so-called mixed city of Lod, or Lydda, in Israel, they observe how powerful groups linked to the state or urban regime 'plan' the city in such a way as to exclude and/or segregate minorities.

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However, the city is used as a political platform not only by powerful majority groups, but also by politically and economically marginal actors, such as minority groups, youth movements, and so on. Thus, the present discussion does not look at identity politics from above, but focuses on young people's *mise-en-scene* and use of ethnicity as capital 'from below' (Friedli, 2013).

While Bourdieu (1985) works with the concepts of cultural and social capital in the context of social classes and class fractions, several anthropologists, especially British anthropologists, use these concepts to look at hierarchies and boundary-making along ethno-cultural lines in the study of migrants' strategies in the education system and in the labour market. The mobilisation of ethnic social capital in terms of ethno-cultural networks has been studied mostly in the context of migrant groups (Modood, 2004; Werbner, 1995), national minorities or diasporas (Kokot, Giordano & Gandelsmann-Trier, 2013). These analyses have focused on the strategies employed by minority groups in overcoming marginality and survive in an alien, more or less hostile, majority. However, identity should not be understood exclusively as a minority phenomenon. Tatar youth in Kazan are not building ethno-cultural social capital in order to overcome the position of a marginalised minority group; they are doing so in their attempt to challenge political power relations by turning ethnicity (which was understood to be a handicap in a Soviet urban context) into a resource, a symbolic (cultural) capital, which according to Bourdieu's framework can be turned into social and economic capital. This is why I speak of Tatar urban youth as identity managers; they use discursively constructed cultural boundaries to distinguish themselves from one community and to associate with another. These strategies and narratives are used in public space and can be understood in terms of identity politics and identity management from below.

Studying urban youth cultures in Kazan: the fieldwork setting and methodological remarks

Participant observation and in-depth interviews were my main research methods. I regularly visited youth events (official and unofficial) and 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 organisations and scenes.

Tatarstan is territorially and politically embedded in the Russian Federation as a so-called 'ethnic republic'. With a population of 3.78 million, Tartarstan is a federal subject and the Tatars are the titular nation. According to the 2010 census, 53.3 per cent of the population define themselves as ethnic Tatars (predominantly Muslim) and 39.7 per cent as ethnic Russians (predominantly Christian-Orthodox). However, in urban areas the proportion of Russians is often slightly higher; for example, according to the 2010 census, 47.6 per cent of Kazan inhabitants define themselves as Tatars and about 48.6 per cent as Russians. This situation finds its roots in pre-Soviet and Soviet national policies. The Soviet understanding of ethnicity and territoriality (Brubaker, 1996: 24) was one of the reasons why, during the Perestroika period, and especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, ethno-cultural consciousness increased in many 'ethnic' regions and in some cases was accompanied by the formation of nationalist movements.

In the official discourse, Tatarstan is represented as a multicultural republic based on a balanced relationship of power among the Tatarstan people (*tatarstanskiy narod*); primarily, that is, between the most dominant ethno-cultural 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).

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The effects of external ethno-national identity projects in post-socialist Tatarstan society are paralleled by the pluralisation of youth identity, mostly influenced by Western youth sub-cultural styles (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 a '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, 2002a: xiv).

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

The making of Tatar urban youth culture

As in many other cities, cultural belonging among the young in Kazan is very diverse and fragmented. Here, I am interested in the ways in which the youth scenes propose themselves as representatives of an alternative Tatar youth culture. Most of the members of such scenes are between 18 and 30 years old; they are in education or have received a university diploma, often in Tatar linguistics or journalism. Many 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 Dulkın* movement, founded by young Tatar actors and poets); youth organisations (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 Turkish-Tatar lyceum). What links them is the aim to 'maintain the Tatar identity under conditions of globalization and ethnic boundary blurring' by establishing a new alternative urban Tatar youth culture (Press release by *Uzebez* 2007). The members of these youth scenes are linked only through loose personal networks; they do not meet regularly and they do not gather in specific places, such as the 'park youth' in Vienna (Mayer, 2011) or the youth cultural scenes in Sochi (Kosterina & Andreeva, 2010). During the summer, spontaneous gatherings take place in different parks or courtyards; in winter, they take place indoors, for example at the actors' green rooms in the Tatar theatre after performances, recording studios, various cafés and bars or in people's homes (when, for instance, the parents are not in).

Tatar youth identity strategies involving ethno-cultural representation of self are mainly based on three main discourses. The first focuses on a boundary-making process against the 'Russian Other'; the second emphasises a Tatar authenticity against globalising tendencies associated with decadent consumerism and the homogenisation of (youth) culture; the third aims at distinguishing the reflective ethno-cultural consciousness of an enlightened urban youth from a folklorised and 'ignorant' rural set-up (Friedli, 2012). In her analysis of the 'reappropriation of Kazan', Helen Faller (2002) describes this distinction as a form of nation-building in Tatarstan. It should be noted that in the Tsarist Russian Empire, Tatar urban dwellers were banned from the economic and political centres or confined to designated outer districts of the urban centres; in the Soviet Union, the latter were strongly Russified. Faller argues that one consequence of this policy was that Tatar national culture was deprived of its urban elements and was thus relegated to a lower level of the cultural evolution scheme. Thus, the revival of Tatar national culture can be viewed in part as an effort to 'repossess' Kazan by people whose purported or real ancestors were exiled to the countryside (Faller, 2002: 81). In this context, the (re)building of Kul Sharif that I have mentioned in the introduction to this article can also be understood as a 'political act'. Tatar youth identity

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managers' project of 'making an urban Tatar youth culture' relies on this idea of repossessing the urban space. Such reappropriation takes place on several levels.

Linguistic reappropriation

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 – to be hidden in public. However, with the growing ethno-cultural consciousness of the 'Tatar people', the (re)appropriation of the urban space (meaning also political space) became part of the nationalist ideology. The fight against 'Russification' is, thus, one of the most dominant topics in Tatar youth discourses. As the 24-year-old Azat said, 'If you don't know your mother tongue, then you lose the link to your ancestors, you lose your roots and become a *Mankurt*' (2008). A *Mankurt* is a legendary character in the novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* by the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov (1980); this word is used to describe persons who have forgotten their roots and have lost the link to their ancestors. It is used pejoratively by Tatar youth to describe Russified Tatars.

The use of the Tatar language in everyday life as well as in public spaces, such as schools and universities, and in the media is assiduously propagated by Tatar youth identity managers, as illustrated, for example, by the *Min tatarça söiläşäm* (literally, 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 26 April – that is, on the birthday of the Tatar national poet Gabdulla Tukay (1886–1913); and all those 'who are not indifferent to the fate of the Tatar language and of the whole Tatar culture' are invited.[3] 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 (Friedli, 2012: 8–9).

Religious reappropriation

In Tatarstan, religious affiliation is strongly linked to discourses of ethno-cultural boundary-making, especially among the young (see, for example, Hodžaeva & Šumilova, 2003; Khodzhaeva, 2011). Although there are ways of Tatar youth ethno-cultural identity building that do not refer to Islam (Friedli, 2014: 173), some features of a Muslim life-style and traditions are integrated into Tatar youth identity discourses. 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 attend 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. Such discourses serve as boundary-making against the Russian (often presented as a barbarian normless 'other') and against a decadent consumerist Western culture. The 'problem' in this boundary-making strategy is the rapprochement with identities of de-ethnicised Islam, or what Olivier Roy (2004) calls globalised Islam, an urban phenomenon that can be observed in many post-Soviet Muslim regions. Many Kazan youth identity managers try to 'root' their religious understanding into a specific Tatar tradition and refer to an enlightened, pre-revolution Tatar-Muslim urban culture. During an informal conversation held in 2008, Rifat (29 years old), one of the founders of the *Uzebez* movement, explained that the Tatar urban *intelligentsia* was systematically destroyed at the beginning of the Soviet era and that, in order to revive a Tatar urban culture, one has to remember the Tatar-Muslim enlightenment movement (*Jadidism*) at the end of the nineteenth century. In this discourse, the historical image of the pre-revolutionary *şaqird*, a *medrese* student, embodies the values of an educated, open-minded but culturally rooted contemporary Tatar youngster (Friedli, 2012: 9).

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Historic reappropriation

The identity discourses indicate that a young urban Tatar should have a reflexive approach to ‘the history of his people’. This ‘reflexive approach’ is displayed publicly through events in the old Tatar district of Kazan (*Starotatarskaya sloboda*), such as the Hay Market (*Peçän Bazarı*), a historical bazaar near the Nurulla mosque recently ‘revived’ by the Tatar youth scenes, or through attendance at 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 mobilised by Tatar youth scenes to make visible their ethno-cultural belonging and to articulate their claims in the public sphere, as exemplified by the *häter köne* (remembrance day) that takes place yearly, 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* tower[4] in remembrance of the Tatar soldiers who died in the fight against the troops of Ivan IV (the Terrible), who conquered Kazan in 1552. Members of the Tatar youth scenes walk with banners bearing inscriptions like ‘The youth, too, are mourning’ or ‘We want independence’, and they organise collective prayers, speeches and concerts in honour of their forefathers (Friedli, 2012: 10–11).

Cultural reappropriation

Another way to express collective identity is through *style* (Hebdige, 1979). The visualisation of ‘Tatarness’ in clothing and fashion has become an important element in the identity management of the urban Tatar youth. This not only involves wearing the *Ichigi* (beautifully decorated traditional Tatar leather boots) or Tatar and/or Muslim headwear (such as the *Tubeteyka* or *Papakha* for boys and the *Kalfak* and Muslim headscarf for girls), but also t-shirts with inscriptions like *100% Tatar kızı* (literally, 100 per cent Tatar girl), or *100% Tatar malae* (100 percent Tatar boy), *Öçpoçmak aşatam, R’n’B yaratam* (‘I eat *öçpoçmak*[5] and love R’n’B’) or even *Min Ivannı yaratmím. Suyumbike* (‘I don’t like Ivan. Suyumbike’). As the designers of these t-shirts state on their homepage, this style represents young Tatars ‘who keep up with the times without forgetting their roots’.[6]

For the urban Tatar youth scenes, music and ‘going out’ serve as markers, distinguishing alternative urban Tatar youth culture from popularised rural Tatar youth culture (for example, Tatar discos) which is ‘imported’ into the city by young people who move from the so-called *rayony* (the countryside districts of Tatarstan) to the capital in order to study or work. To the Tatar urban youth scenes, these popularised events are pure entertainment focused on Tatar *popsa*.[7] On the contrary, the alternative urban Tatar youth organise 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’; they do not play Tatar *popsa* and do not involve Tatar pop star performances, but only ‘high standard DJs and live Tatar alternative music’ (Press release by *Uzäk* party organisers, 2007; Friedli, 2012: 12–13).

Conclusion

In the case of Kazan, urban space is not (only) a ‘melting pot’ where cultural and social diversity is multiplied and merged into a mass of cosmopolitan urban dwellers, where seemingly primordial boundaries such as ethnicity and religion lose relevance. Here, urban space is understood as a political platform where claims of ethno-cultural recognition are formulated and bargained. I have examined the display of ethno-cultural belonging by Tatar youth, their using Tatar language in predominantly Russophone public spheres and Tatar folkloristic elements in youth cultural

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products (such as fashion or music), their appealing to a (lost) Tatar urban culture associated with an enlightened approach to Islam (*Jadidism*) and to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Tatar intelligentsia (poets, philosophers and scientists). Thus, the classical rural-urban continuum inscribing itself into the modernisation paradigm and emanating from a rural, traditional, communitarian and particular vs an urban, modern, individual and generalised/homogenised society is more than obsolete. As Humphrey and Skvirskaja (2012) suggest, the idea of the city as a space of cosmopolitanism should probably be questioned in favour of other concepts to reflect relationships, norms and values in urban life.

A concept such as glocalisation, for example, allows us to describe the multiplication of identities in an urban context or, as the British youth sociologist Hilary Pilkington puts it, 'global-local positionings are more than the points at which "global culture" is accessed; they are markers of difference that are mobilized reflexively by young people alongside other (gender, ethnicity, social status) in the production of diverse, locally rooted but globally resourced youth cultural *strategies*' (Pilkington, 2002b: 119, italics in the original). It goes without saying that glocalisation is not a specific post-Soviet phenomenon and that the identity strategies discussed above have to be understood in the light of globalisation. These strategies invite an understanding of local cultural authenticity as a counter-phenomenon to globalisation but also as part of the globalisation process. The display of ethnicity in the city can thus be understood as the 'contemporary assertion of ethnicity and/or nationality […] within the global terms of identity and particularity' (Robertson, 1995: 26) on the one hand, and as a (re)possession of cultural and political space on the other.

Notes

1. Part of the fieldwork was financed by the Swiss National Scientific Foundation (Grant for Prospective Researchers).
2. Note on the transcription of Cyrillic Russian/Tatar names and terms: the English transcription/translation is used for names and places common in the anglophone literature. For the transcription of special Russian and Tatar terms and sentences the scientific transliteration system is applied.
3. Homepage of *Uzebez*: www.uzebez.org (last accessed 27 April 2012).
4. According to the legend, *Suyumbike*, the last empress of the Kazan Khanate, chose to commit suicide by jumping from a tower rather than to fall into the hands of the Russian enemy.
5. A traditional Tatar triangular pastry filled with meat, onion and potatoes.
6. http://dressaytam.com/static/about (last accessed 25 March 2012).
7. 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.

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