

# UDMURT IDENTITY ISSUES: CORE MOMENTS FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT DAY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper\* gives an overview of collective identity issues among the Udmurt people, stressing the importance of the historical background since 1552, up to and including current Udmurt ethnic activity. The first section of the paper considers the foundations of the Udmurt collective identity (linguistic family and the significance of the territory). The second section focuses on occasions when Udmurt identity markers were at stake as a consequence of official policies or legal affairs during the Tsarist and Soviet periods. The third section presents the paradoxical role of the capital of Udmurtia, Izhevsk, the place where assimilation into Russian culture is more important than anywhere else, and which is also the centre of linguistic and cultural official planning where institutional structures are devoted to minority preservation. The last section will be dedicated to Udmurt contemporary ethnic activity in the context of globalisation.

KEYWORDS: Udmurt • Russia • history • globalisation • ethnic activity • identity

## INTRODUCTION

One of the consequences of *perestroika*, initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, and of the collapse of the USSR in 1991, was the possibility, for the non-Russian minorities of the former Soviet Union, to start redefining their identities. The effects of this movement, also called “the USSR Republics’ parade of sovereignty” (Petrov 2004) – the questioning of the supremacy of the laws of the USSR, increased national autonomy of non-Russian subjects of the Russian Federation – have manifested themselves in different ways. Some former SSRs, like the Baltic States, separated from the USSR. For example, the Sovereignty Declaration of the Estonian SSR was passed on 16 November 1988, the restoration of Latvia’s independence took place on 4 May 1990 and the re-establishment of the State of Lithuania on 11 March 1990. Apart from these, other attempts to restore national independence have led to war (see, for example, conflicts

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in the Caucasus). However, for many of the peoples of Russia, the consequences were less spectacular. Within the Russian Federation, some ethnic minorities began to consider new ways of relating to the state, which were transformed into negotiations with the aim of acquiring a more desirable political status, including official recognition and sovereignty. Such is the case for the Volga region's minorities, although the scope of post-Soviet change is wide: the strong-minded Tatar minority obtained important benefits, including ownership of its rich subsoil (Parent 2011: 285), while Udmurtia, a long-standing strategic armament zone where Udmurts constitute less than one third of the present-day population of their eponymous Republic, was unable to muster the decisive advantage necessary to achieve statutory recognition. Despite many administrative decisions in the 2000s made under the Putin and Medvedev governments – for example, the incorporation of deficit areas populated by non-Russian minorities into wealthier regions<sup>1</sup> – the aim of which was to regain regional control lost during the 1990s, the ethnic activists<sup>2</sup> pursued the process of redefining their identity through an affirmation of non-Russian minority recognition.

This article is based on the literature concerning Udmurt identity issues and is complemented by several interviews, conducted between 2009 and 2012, with contemporary Udmurt ethnic activists. My informants were volunteers who considered themselves active participants in the development of contemporary Udmurt culture (they were related to universities, promo-groups, research institutes, museums, etc.). The interviews were either formal or informal<sup>3</sup> and focused on qualitative aspects. The data collected concerns three main aspects of Udmurt identity: what creates the feeling of membership to the Udmurt community, what it means to be Udmurt and which references informants invoke concerning Udmurt identity.

Talking about a people whom I do not represent is a tricky task. The subject is not easy to navigate. Scientific rigor prevents non-native researchers from applying concepts from our own scientific tradition to people whose individual and collective construction is not founded on the same conceptual basis. In some languages (for example, French *identité*, English *identity*, Spanish *identidad*) this notion can refer to the entangled factors (cultural, economic, social, political and historical) that affect a self-aware group (Chevallier, Morel 1985: 3). In contrast, in neither Udmurt nor Russian do the translations for identity cover the full meaning methodologically required for the study of what French, English or Spanish people would call identity: *identichnost'* (the Russian word is also used in Udmurt) concerns only the psychological aspects of individuals, while the Udmurt notion *s'am* or the adjective *aspörtemlykse valas'murt* can refer to the personality of an individual<sup>4</sup> (in Russian *lichnost'*). The dictionaries give us further definitions: Udmurt *kalykvyjy* (in Russian *natsionalnost'*) is affiliation with an ethnic group (Maksimov, Danilov, Saarinen 2008: 184). However, one can consider the Udmurt notions of self-consciousness, *asshödon* or *asvalan*<sup>5</sup> (in Russian *samosoznanie*), as closer to the French, English and Spanish meaning of identity previously mentioned. In this article, based also on the results of my fieldwork<sup>6</sup> in Izhevsk, I will use the notion of identity not as an issue in itself but as a theoretical tool: I will not try to determine what Udmurt identity is, rather I will use the cultural elements considered as part of Udmurt identity by my self-identified Udmurt informants.

Having said that, the preservation of Udmurt identity is of major concern to the Udmurt people themselves. The extent of research activity conducted by ethnic Udmurts

about Udmurt people demonstrates the intensity of the concern regarding their destiny as a nation. The scholars of the Udmurt Institute of History, Language and Literature (Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences), carry out research in Udmurt archaeology, ethnography, indigenous history, literature and folklore. According to the Director of the Institute Alexey Zagrebin, the most dynamic period for Udmurt research was between 1990 and 1998, but the Institute currently publishes between 10 and 12 items every year (Casen 2010: 166): monographs, conference proceedings, reviews and studies, including the series *Феномен Удмуртии* (Phenomenon of Udmurtia)<sup>7</sup> which is made up of legal texts, analyses of Udmurtia and the Udmurts, as well as results of a survey on the changes in Udmurtia since the 1990s (see Smirnova 2002). More recently, the doctoral thesis by Vladimir Vorontsov (2003) on ethnic self-consciousness among students in Udmurtia and the presentation about Udmurts in the contemporary world, given by an Udmurt researcher Galina Nikitina (2012) during the Udmurt Days, which took place in Paris from 13 to 15 December 2012, have shown the topicality of the issue of identity preservation, in connection with the problem of the strong and permanent cultural assimilation into the dominant Russian culture. Thus, in the Udmurt Republic all the censuses show the continuing assimilation process and its serious consequences: the Udmurt population is constantly decreasing. In 1926, the Udmurts made up 52 per cent of the population of their titular administrative unit, while in 2010 the share of Udmurts was only 28 per cent (Rosstat 2010).

I will first present the Udmurts in the context of both their Finno-Ugric linguistic family and their region, elements still considered as the foundations of their collective identity (Casen 2010: 412). Then, in order to give an idea of the identity issues in Udmurt history, I will consider central moments when some of the markers of their identity (faith, traditional culture) were at stake and came to light in the public sphere. Finally, I will analyse the manifestations of current ethnic activity, both displaying the institutional structures devoted to minority preservation, and presenting contemporary Udmurt identity issues in the context of globalisation.

#### THE FOUNDATION OF THE MODERN UDMURT COLLECTIVE IDENTITY<sup>8</sup>

Two unchanging features have played an important role for the construction of Udmurt identity: the permanent relationships of Udmurts with linguistically related peoples, and their territorial rootedness in particular within the Volga region.

##### *The Udmurts in the Finno-Ugric Family*

Udmurt language is related to the Permic branch of Finno-Ugric languages. It is close to the Komi languages, Komi-Zyrian and Komi-Permyak (Salánki 2004: 223), and morphologically not very far from Finnic languages. From a political perspective, Finno-Ugric peoples can be classified into two sub-categories: peoples with their own titular state (Finns, Hungarians and Estonians), and peoples who “have always been submitted to an ethnically different group” (Toulouze, forthcoming). The latter comprise of Kareli-

ans, Mordvins, Mari, Udmurts, Komi, Veps, Ingrians, Livonians, Votes, Sami; and in Siberia the Enets, Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, Nganasan and the Selkup people. Up to the present, the great number of projects for scholarly and artistic cooperation in networks with their linguistic relatives allows a growing sense of belonging among the peoples of Finno-Ugric family.

### *The Udmurt Land*

The Udmurt-populated area is inscribed in the south and northeast of the quadrangle formed by the lower Kama and the Vyatka rivers (Moreau 2009). As, historically, Udmurt settlement has existed since much earlier than a titular administrative territory, about one fifth of ethnic Udmurts<sup>9</sup> live outside the boundaries of Udmurtia: in the republics of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Mari El, in Perm Krai, or in Kirov, Sverdlovsk and Tyumen oblasts. Most Udmurts live in their eponymous territory that was granted an autonomous status (the Votyak Autonomous Oblast<sup>10</sup>) in 1920, at the same time as the other Volga peoples gained their titular administrative units.<sup>11</sup>

Although Udmurts have at present minority status<sup>12</sup> in the Udmurt Republic, this official recognition had contributed to Udmurt identity building – at least until the middle of the 1920s when they were still free to develop their culture as shown by their enthusiastic participation<sup>13</sup> in the Bolshevik literary structures (Kulikov 1997: 72). At that time, Soviet nationality policy was rather supportive of the non-Russian nationalities: to use the official terms, “great-power chauvinism” was seen as more dangerous for the Soviet power than “local nationalism” (Toulouze, forthcoming).<sup>14</sup> In 1934, this territory became the Udmurt Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (UASSR).

As a consequence of the collapse of the USSR, the Udmurt ASSR became the Udmurt Republic<sup>15</sup> on 20 September 1990. It had been hoped that the new status could lead to the recognition of sovereignty and political self-determination of the people living in this territory, but this did not happen since Moscow still held the majority of political and constitutional powers (Casen 2010: 211). Today, as noted by Svetlana Edygarova (2012), Udmurts do not typically associate their ethnic identity with the administrative territory of Udmurtia, but rather more commonly refer to a geographically closer community, for example, to the village or to an abstract community, including representatives of the Udmurt diaspora living in the wider Volga region.

### *The Udmurts in the Volga Region*

Udmurtia is situated in the Volga Federal District, which is, with Caucasus, one of the most diverse parts of the Russian Federation in terms of ethnic composition. It incorporates 14 federal subjects, including six ethno-territorial republics: the Mari-El Republic, the Republic of Bashkortostan, the Republic of Mordovia, the Republic of Tatarstan, the Chuvash Republic and the Udmurt Republic (see Figure 1). A history of successive invasions (by Huns, Bulgars, Tatars, Slavic peoples) explains the multi-ethnic composition of the region, which includes Russians, Turks (Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvashes) and Finno-Ugrians (Maris, Mordvins, Komi-Permyaks, Udmurts) with their diverse languages and cultures, and the commensurate religious diversity (ARENA Survey 2012).<sup>16</sup>

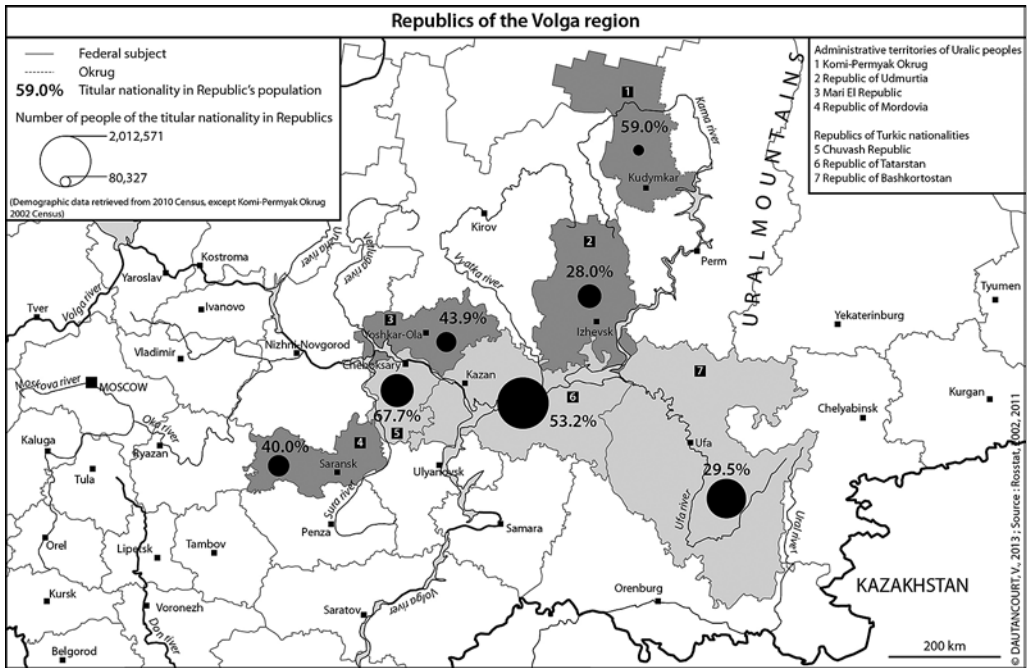


Figure 1. Map of the Volga Region.

As a consequence of centuries of cohabitation, the Volga region is characterised by a high degree of interaction between ethnic groups, which is another historical element of identity construction for the Udmurt and other peoples of the Volga region. As far as Udmurtia is concerned, the southern part, traditionally settled by Finno-Ugrians, was ruled by Mongolians of the Golden Horde until the fall of the Kazan Khanate in 1552, while the north was part of Muscovy (Vladykin, Kristoliubova 1997: 31–36).

Therefore, the political and administrative territory (Udmurtia in its current boundaries) is not, for most of the Udmurt, the referential framework of their identity; most important are local territories (villages), which are smaller and more functional: Udmurts are more willing to refer to them as the territorially significant markers of Udmurt identity. The non-geographical but abstract and imaginary Udmurt (including the diaspora) and Finno-Ugric communities also represent a foundation for identity construction.

Another noteworthy feature, resulting from ancient and recent Udmurt history, is the long-standing assimilation process to the dominant Russian culture (Nikitina, forthcoming). The measures taken by the Ministry of National Policy in Udmurtia to preserve minority peoples did not seem persuasive enough in the face of the advantages offered by assimilation into the prevailing Russian culture. From a political point of view the situation is a paradox. On the one hand, the Soviet period, as well as the current leaders of the Russian Federation, has provided the means for Udmurt national recognition (a territory, for example) and to preserve their identity (the Ministry of National Policy). On the other hand, the policies implemented by the authorities have been generally harmful to the Udmurts by constantly destroying the will for rebirth and appreciation of their indigenous culture.

In this section, I would like to situate the historical background in which the Udmurt identity question has been prominent, in order to shed light on the significance of present day Udmurt ethnic activity. This demarche is analysed by Bruno Karsenti (2012: 12–50) in his book about the significance of the notion of nation, where he demonstrates three steps in identity building: the facts (reality), the stories presenting the facts (history), and the appropriation of this speech by individuals (identity building). Recounting the stories and historical narratives of a people participates in sketching the fictive framework in which a society can recognise and constitute itself as a people.

*The Tsarist Period*

Between 1552<sup>17</sup> and 1917 Udmurt people were guilty of not being Christians. The Orthodox Church considered the conversion of the peoples with Animist and Muslim faiths of the Volga region an essential task for their integration in the Russian state. In her thesis about the emergence of written culture among the Udmurts, Eva Toulouze (2000) has pointed out that the authors (for example, Kappeler 1982) usually distinguish two moments in this process. A “preparation period”<sup>18</sup> that aimed to accustom the heterodox people to the new Russian State by finding allies in the population and by installing the structures (churches, monasteries) for the second step, and the second period, that of forced conversions, starting in the 17th century. The use of violence, physical aggressions, material destruction<sup>19</sup> and psychological pressure (constant control of rituals by church officials), had notable effects. It made the Udmurt people realise the total assimilation intentions of the Russian State; in addition to which, Christianisation partly succeeded in eradicating the Udmurt ancestral faith, even if there had been resistance expressed through gatherings and syncretistic religious practices. (Toulouze 2000: 126)<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Udmurt identity was in question and brought under the public eye through religious-related accusations with the Vuzh Multan<sup>21</sup> Affair, which took place in 1892. The Vuzh Multan affair was the first time the Udmurt made headlines and received wide coverage in the press. The main point discussed was quite an intimate one: Udmurt beliefs and religious issues. At the end of the 19th century, Tsarist Russia was developing its industries, including an arms factory in Izhevsk, the capital of Udmurtia. In that period, the labour of the Russian settlers did not meet demand and the help of indigenous rural people became necessary. As a consequence, there was more frequent contact between the first inhabitants of Izhevsk and the recently arrived population of Udmurt workers. In 1892, ten Udmurt peasants were accused of having committed the ritual murder of a Russian beggar. While no serious proof was found against them, “they were mainly guilty of belonging to a people suspected to practice barbaric rituals” (Toulouze 2012). The first trial in Malmyzh (1894) led to the conviction of seven Udmurts who were sentenced to many years of forced labour. This sentence was imposed without regard for the right to a defence, and the defendants filed a cassation application. As a result, the court of final appeal reversed the judgement. There was a second trial in Elabuga (1895) under the same conditions and with the same

result. At the third trial, in Saint Petersburg (1896), the seven Udmurts were acquitted. (Vanyushev 1995: 141–256) At the time, the Vuzh Multan Affair resonated to Moscow and Paris. But even years later the Russian press persisted in presenting Udmurts as uncivilised and dangerous people. The *Gorodskoi Stil* newspaper published an illustration to commemorate the centenary of the Vuzh Multan Affair with a drawing beside the text that represents a fire, the smoke of which rises in the form of a question mark, as if the Udmurts' innocence remained unproven (Shkلياev, Toulouze 2001). In this affair the Udmurts were made scapegoats, they were stigmatised as having a criminal culture, a situation shared by other non-Christian European minorities of the same period (Toulouze 2012).

### *The Soviet Period*

The Soviet period is a pivotal period for Udmurt identity building, in turn supported, as in the first half of the 1920s, and dampened, as occurred between 1925 and the 1930s, as shown by the SOFIN<sup>22</sup> Affair. The turning point occurred with a shift in orientation of the party's ideology: the Russian-minded tendency became the leading one (Toulouze, forthcoming). Encouraged by the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia (15 November 1917) by the new Bolshevik regime, the Udmurt intelligentsia teemed with activities, and Udmurts could, at that time, identify themselves as a group without fear and in a most gratifying manner. The promotion of indigenous people, as expressed through the policy of indigenisation, allowed the Udmurts to enjoy socio-professional and cultural recognition by occupying important positions in literary circles.

Udmurt intellectuals began to shape Udmurt identity through several publications in Udmurt language: newspapers (*Voinays' Uvor*, *Gudyri*,<sup>23</sup> and several local newspapers), poetry (including *Krez'ci* by Kuzebay Gerd in 1922 and Ashalchi Oki's *Siures duryn* in 1925), translations, and publications on contemporary issues, the advancement of women's status, agricultural techniques and folk medicine (Toulouze 2001: 96–98). These works are the source of the first large-scale recognition of Udmurt culture, and were popular and enjoyed by the Udmurt public. Moreover, the production of Udmurt texts was supported by the leaders of the Soviet Union as a way of tackling the issue of illiteracy. These were rich and constructive years for Udmurt people as well as for the other indigenous peoples of the Volga region: the works of enthusiastic intellectuals forged lasting modern roots for Udmurt identity in such a way that the contemporary Udmurt intelligentsia still refers to them.<sup>24</sup>

In the middle of the 1930s, indigenous promotion started to be viewed as an obstacle to the realisation of the party's ideology. In the article "Socialist construction among the Volga region people", published in 1937 in the journal *Sovetskaya Etnografiya*, unrelenting attacks against the peoples of the Volga region were justified like this: "For the people of multinational Russia previous history is over and the history of liberated people begins" (Lekomtsev 1937: 3–14; Zagrebin 2007: 71). Considering the deep nature-based organisation of Udmurt traditional life, the upheaval of the rural structures and the way of life is undoubtedly responsible for the destruction of the Udmurt identity framework. The main periods concerned are the collectivisation that started in 1928, when

a great number of Udmurt peasants were repressed as kulaks (Nikitina 1998), and the liquidation of 'perspectiveless' villages in the 1960s and 1970s (Heikkinen 2000: 290), the consequences of which were the disintegration of the social network of linguistic communities and the elimination of traditional values that cemented Udmurt identity.

In the collectivisation period, the SOFIN Affair (1932–1934), was one of the first signs announcing the Stalin terror. It struck the Udmurt intelligentsia hard and was one of the saddest and most detrimental historical events to damage seriously the possibilities for building and confirming an Udmurt national identity. The burgeoning generation of Udmurt intellectuals<sup>25</sup> from the 1920s, including Konstantin Yakovlev, Trofim Borisov, Kuzebay Gerd and the poetess Ashalchi Oki, were arrested by the OGPU and the NKVD.<sup>26</sup> They were jailed, executed or terrorised and silenced by the Soviet regime, on the pretext that they were spies working for Finland in order to assemble a "great Finland, from the Atlantic ocean to the Ural mountains" (Kulikov 1997: 41). Any tendency to affirm Udmurt identity was repressed with such violence that Udmurt poetry could not find its voice again until 1991, with Viktor Shibanov's book of poetry *Bertis'ko Uishore* (I come at midnight).

Can the year 1991 can be considered as ushering in a prosperous period for the construction of Udmurt identity, comparable to the dynamic that existed in the 1920s? Strictly speaking, if the enthusiasm and sensibility of Udmurt ethnic activists were similar to the spirit of the poets of the 1920s, the comparison ends there. Times have changed. Apart from the political and economic background and changes, the most notable consequence of the collapse of the USSR for the Udmurt people, whose identity was built in the countryside, is gradual, irremediable and lasting migration to the cities, which will have significant effects on the construction of identity for the youngest generations.

## THE UDMURTS IN IZHEVSK

Although the Udmurt traditions and identity are closely connected to the countryside, rural economy (Vinogradov 2009) and pace of nature (Casen 2010: 54),<sup>27</sup> urban Udmurt settlement is not a new phenomenon: in the 19th century, booming industries required local Udmurt and Tatar labour to lend aid to the Russian workers who had settled there during the previous century.

### *Izhevsk, a Russian Town*

Izhevsk was founded in 1760 to respond to the various needs of the metallurgical and armaments industries. First, Russian settlers came and became workers in the factories and forges. At the beginning of the 19th century, Tsarist Russia operated two weapon plants that were significant to its territorial ambitions in the Caucasus: Tula, about one hundred kilometres from Moscow, and Sestroretsk, in the Gulf of Finland. Nevertheless, the Izhevsk arms factory was built in order to supplement the Tsarist army's need for firearms.



The predominance of the industrial sector persisted throughout the Soviet period, when advanced technological military equipment was the regime's priority, and it has remained so to this day even if the infrastructure is obsolete and the most important factories (for example, the Izhavto car company in Izhevsk) are no longer competitive. In 1863, Izhevsk's population was nearly 23,000 inhabitants; in 2010 it was 610,633 (Rosstat 2010). Russians are the majority accounting for around 59 per cent of the total population of the town, while the share of Udmurts is 30 per cent, and that of Tatars is 10 per cent.

The history of this town, its strategic importance to Moscow, especially during the Soviet era, illustrates how serious an issue assimilation was. The fact is that, aside from a brief period in the 1920s, there was no evidence of Udmurt identity until the 1990s, except in the 'frozen', sometimes misrepresented forms of folklore ensembles (Casen 2010: 60).

### *The Udmurt Language in Izhevsk*

At the sociolinguistic level, the Udmurt language is not much used in Izhevsk, as shown by the survey titled *Electrocardiogram of Social Changes*, published in 2002, which compared two samples of the Udmurt population: adults living within the territorial borders of the Udmurt Republic, and the Udmurt students of Izhevsk (Smirnova 2002: 424–516). The results revealed the situation of the Udmurt as a minority and their language as of minimal use in daily life. Indeed, a clear generational distinction must be made between the mother tongue (as a heritage referring to the past), and the communication language within the family (the language of everyday communication): for 75 per cent of survey respondents Udmurt is the mother tongue, while 60 per cent of those surveyed use it in the family.

The survey also showed that the language skills of urban speakers are weaker than those of rural Udmurts, reflecting the assimilation process that continues to inflict damage on language competence. Furthermore, urban Udmurt is a standardised language whose purified style avoids Russian loan words as much as possible (Edygarova 2012), while dialectal varieties spoken by the majority of Udmurts are available in the vernacular sphere (village community). Urban Udmurt is an abstract language with underdeveloped functionality in everyday communication. According to Svetlana Edygarova,<sup>28</sup> if this function is not revitalised, Udmurt will find itself in the same situation as Irish (Gaelic): as a consequence of its diminished use as a community language, Udmurt culture and identity will become abstract concepts.

The minimal use of Udmurt language in daily life touches the crucial role that language-planning representatives play in the preservation of the language (Nikitina, forthcoming). Language planning in the Udmurt Republic is the responsibility of the Ministry of National Policy, headed by Vladimir Zavalin, whose jurisdiction covers all the nationalities represented in the Republic (about 100). In other words, the function of the Ministry is not to promote specifically the Udmurt language. Under the Resolution of the Government of the Udmurt Republic from 16 June 1997, concerning the development of the national components of regional state in educational standards, two successive programs were carried out between 2005 and 2009,<sup>29</sup> and between 2010 and 2014,<sup>30</sup> by the Ministry. As a subject of the Russian Federation, Udmurtia must follow the poli-

cies and the priorities set by Moscow. In accordance with Article 8 of the Constitution of the Udmurt Republic (7 December 1994), the Udmurt language is, with Russian, the official co-language of Udmurtia, although this law is not applied. According to a 2007 survey by the Ministry of National Policy, aimed at assessing the application of this law, even road signs and names of major Izhevsk factories are still only in Russian. In addition, there is another serious obstacle to the popularisation of the Udmurt language: only the Udmurt elite participate in cultural development, while the majority of Udmurt people is not involved (Casen 2010: 20), which can be explained by the fact that the Udmurt language is almost absent in the education system.

### *Udmurt Language in the Education System*<sup>31</sup>

The education system is at the heart of the question of Udmurt identity because it is primarily responsible for the language education of the young Udmurt generation, and also because it is an agent for social formation by preparing individuals to hold certain positions in society. Thus, from a civic perspective, the national particularities are left behind, Udmurt language remains marginal, and its representatives have a minimal access to powerful social positions.

According to Article 68 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation (12 December 1993), “the Russian Federation guarantees to all its peoples the right to preserve their native language, to create conditions for its study and development”. In addition, according to Articles 10, 11 and 12 of the Federal Law On National and Cultural Autonomy (17 June 1996), “citizens of the Russian Federation have the right to receive basic general education in their mother tongue”. The creation of national schools in the 1920s was a measure taken to apply the Communist program of ‘indigenisation’, although it was quickly rejected: during the Stalinist period, the Communist policy changed and favoured Russian (Edgar 2004: 97–99). In the 1980s, legislation was introduced which attempted to restore modern education in national languages<sup>32</sup> in that, apart from language courses, study programs included the history and culture of indigenous peoples. These measures were effective until the end of the 1990s, although the number of national schools began to decrease again in the 2000s<sup>33</sup> (Vasilyeva 2006), and the Udmurt language is only a school subject, not the language of instruction. The redaction of the Federal Law on Education passed on 1 December 2007 poses an additional threat to national education because it modifies or excludes the Udmurt-specific components from public education and, in practice, prohibits evaluation in non-Russian languages (Article 16.3).

In Izhevsk, an example of Udmurt national education is the Kuzebay Gerd School. It was founded in 1999 with the aim of supporting Udmurt language and culture. Classes were supposed to be taught in Udmurt, although now Udmurt is as present in that school as it is in the 13 other secondary schools of the capital, which offer a “language and art” major, in which it is possible to study the Udmurt language. (Casen 2010: 42) As a consequence, young people who wish to study Udmurt, and not pursue artistic careers, are forced to relinquish any business, political or scientific ambitions. At the Udmurt State University, the Department of Udmurt Philology, opened in 1993,<sup>34</sup> offers majors in languages, literature and new technologies in philology. Most of the students

there learn another Finno-Ugric language (Finnish or Hungarian) and elements of Udmurt culture, such as singing, music, dance, cinema and fashion.<sup>35</sup>

Today, in Izhevsk, young Udmurts are still not trained for disciplines that prepare them for the challenges of universal modernisation, or they are trained, but in Russian. On the one hand, the authorities have strengthened the status of the language, while, at the same time, they restrict the possibilities of its daily use. They promote cultural recognition without giving Udmurts the means for statutory (socio-professional) recognition. National cultural associations, especially the one named Shundy,<sup>36</sup> try to improve young Udmurts' statutory recognition. Shundy was established in 1992 by a team that included, among other artists and intellectuals,<sup>37</sup> Svetlana Smirnova, former deputy of the Federal State Duma, and current vice-president of the State Committee for Youth Affairs of Udmurt Republic. Shundy plays an important role in civic education in a multiethnic Republic and also encourages the social advancement of young Udmurt people. It maintains relationships with Finno-Ugric youth organisations (for example, the Youth Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples, MAFUN) to ensure its members are included in a wider Finno-Ugric network.

As Russian society modernises, studying or working in Izhevsk is more and more common. Although the city tends to push minorities into the assimilation process, expressions of original urban Udmurt identity may be found, originating from groups and individuals who do not wish to be connected with anything official (such as support from the Ministry, for example).

## THE POST-SOVIET UDMURT GENERATION

Udmurt ethnic activists can be classified according to their generation. Individuals of every generation bear the socio-professional, political and cultural characteristics of their era. This explains the reasons for the methods of their actions. In this way, we can distinguish between two generational groups: one composed of individuals whose Udmurt identity was built during the Soviet period, and the other, which is made up of people who came of age during or after *perestroika*. These young people are more familiar with new values such as human rights, which are widely accepted in a great part of the world and have penetrated the Russian countryside through pervasive use of the media (television, newspapers, radio, and, in the last years, the Internet). The differences between these generations are not based only on age differences, but also tied to the entangled political, social and economic changes initiated by the older generation and implemented among the youngest.

### *The Promo-groups of the Ethnic Activists and the Internet*

Promo-groups are entities whose purpose is to promote a defined community by making its members more visible in the public sphere and consequently attracting new membership. The current Udmurt promo-groups are the only groups capable of bringing together Udmurt and Udmurt-friendly people around unofficial activities. The mission of the organisation Iumshan-promo,<sup>38</sup> created in 2005, is to collect, preserve, pro-

mote and interpret the artistic and cultural heritage of Udmurt people. Its main goal is to satisfy a critical need expressed by young Udmurts: the desire to form an urban community in the city (Casen 2010: 104). Thus, Iumshan-promo tries to meet the goal by hosting concerts, open-air performances and nightclub events. Although the primary purpose is to provide a modern output for young Udmurts, the group is deeply rooted in Udmurt tradition and rejects what we can call 'official folklore' – a widespread phenomenon in Russia, where elements inspired from authentic oral traditions are stylised and adapted to the stage in the Moiseev ballet style. Indeed, Iumshan-promo is influenced by ethno-futurist ideology,<sup>39</sup> which brings hope for future development of minority people threatened by assimilation through the means of language, art and tradition (Sallamaa 1999). The first urban Udmurt festival in Izhevsk in 2009, the theme of which was the modernisation of Udmurt culture, was organised by Iumshan-promo, and consisted of lectures, debates and celebrations. More recently, another Udmurt promogroup, Kechjöl zhyt'ës,<sup>40</sup> organised events related to International Women's Day, on 8 March 2013 in Buranovo, the home village of the famous Udmurt folk group Buranovskiy Babushki (Buranovo grandmothers), who won second place at the Eurovision song contest in 2012.

These Udmurt community gatherings and initiatives to promote Udmurt visibility are anchored in contemporary issues, such as modernisation and women's rights. Ethnic activists use the means of our era, such as debates, performances and celebrations. The arrival of the Internet in Udmurtia in 2000 was one of the crucial events for the expression of Udmurt identity. Following global trends and the desire to form a community, the Internet is omnipresent as a powerful tool of ethnic activity, especially through social networks, participatory websites and forums, as they are characterised as reshaping social units based on particular features (Sarhimaa 2009: 162).

One of the Internet's significant advantages for the endangered minorities, suffering from the pressure of assimilation from the dominant culture, is the fact that it is a tool of mass-communication that escapes the mass control of the state,<sup>41</sup> and serves therefore as a serious alternative to the traditional media.

Sébastien Cagnoli (2012), a researcher on Komi identity issues, has drawn an overview of the Finno-Ugric social network, focusing on non-sovereign people, i.e. the Finno-Ugrians of Russia. Cagnoli noted that this network is not only Komi or Udmurt but clearly entrenched in the overall Finno-Ugric perspective. The presence of Finno-Ugrians in Russian social networks such as VKontakte, Odnoklasniki, the international portal Facebook, as well as in the participatory websites including forums and comments (for example, Uralistica, Finugor), shares the same goal: reinforce Finno-Ugric community self-awareness by creating a sense of membership based on a focus on common features, often the shared identity of endangerment. Although these groups and the relationships between users are virtual, the sense of belonging to a community is real, and positively and truly experienced. For this reason it can be said that virtual communities enforce the construction of individual identity. Furthermore, the topics of the interactions, such as cultural events, political and social issues, current research, etc., deal with the present and with contemporary concerns, and this allows the use of Udmurt as the means of communication, more widely than in the family or village spheres. In short, the Internet social networks represent an astounding laboratory for the future of Udmurt identity.

## The Strategies of Udmurt Ethnic Activists

Initiatives of Udmurt ethnic activism take at least two directions. The first line consists of the cultivation of the growing consciousness of a broader cultural heritage (the Finno-Ugric family) that may help to fill in the gap of self-recognition as Udmurt people, pointed out by Svetlana Edygarova (2012). The second direction is the combination of the standards and values of the globalised society<sup>42</sup> with elements of traditional Udmurt culture. This cultural integration finds numerous expressions: Evgeni Bikuzin's street art uses stencil portrait of the prominent Udmurt poet, Kuzebay Gerd (see Photo 1). The artist depicts this integration movement through another stencil work that represents an Udmurt girl carrying a placard with the inscription "Speak English, dress Italian, kiss French, be Udmurt" (see Photo 2). In other words, the young artist invites his generation to take the best that other people have to offer in order to become the best people they can be.

In the same vein, neo-folk fashion designers create contemporary clothes by using Udmurt sewing techniques and inspiration from ancient times. Music also illustrates the appropriation of successful foreign elements: the recent Udmurt version of the top hit *Gangnam style*, titled *Opa val no skal*<sup>43</sup> by Ullapalla Boy, and the Udmurt version of the Beatles' songs *Let it be* and *Yesterday* performed by Buranovskiye Babushki. We can assume that the strategy of building an identity by integrating foreign elements promotes collective self-awareness. It also, however, raises the serious question of the limitations of this strategy as this integration process can threaten the core of Udmurt identity, or even replace it.



Photo 1. Evgeni Bikuzin's Street Art: Kuzebay Gerd. Photo by the artist in Izhevsk, 2012.



Photo 2. Evgeni Bikuzin's Street Art: *Speak English, dress Italian, kiss French, be Udmurt*. Photo by the artist in Izhevsk, 2012.

### *Acculturation as Another Modality of Assimilation*

The cultural codes borrowed from abroad and from dominant cultures (for example, Western or Asian cultures) may constitute threats and be harmful to the identities of minorities, when they take the place of original cultural norms. These minorities may abandon their native cultural codes in favour of more appealing ways of life. The behaviours of young urban Udmurts are thus categorised by the Udmurt researcher Galina Nikitina from the Udmurt Institute of History, Language and Literature as follows: acculturation (that is taking over Western or Asian cultures), assimilation (that is Russification) and ethnic activity (Casen 2010: 113). In my opinion, it is quite unlikely that Udmurt ethnic activists will fall into the trap of acculturation in light of the fact that they are already attuned to the issues of identity endangerment through combating assimilation processes. On the contrary, acculturation poses a real threat to the Udmurts who are not themselves committed to the development of their culture. Indeed, the global culture, widely visible and glamorised in the worldwide media, may appear a more prestigious alternative to Udmurt and Russian cultures.

It appears that the use of global culture codes by the Udmurt ethnic activists reflects a desire to place their culture on an equal footing with influential and media-exporting cultures. This strategy allows Udmurt culture to become competitive on the international cultural scene. Indeed, this approach is illustrated by the recent hit song by Buranovskiye Babushki *Party for Everybody*, when they represented Russia at the Eurovision song contest in 2012 in Baku. On the evening of the show, the whole of Russia

supported the Udmurt team against the foreign opponents. Another event that received less media attention, but which is also indicative of this strategy, a recent Udmurt film called *Uzy Bory* (2011),<sup>44</sup> was a resounding success in the Udmurt Republic. Unlike previous Udmurt films (for example, documentary films or *The Shadow of Alangasar*, 1994), *Uzy Bory* is a romantic comedy, a mainstream film genre, and touches on universal themes such as love, injustice, friendship and adolescence. However, the film points out precisely the issues at stake for Udmurts today: the division between rural and urban Udmurts, painful compulsory military service, social hierarchy and relationships among Udmurts. Moreover, *Uzy Bory* demonstrates the effectiveness of Udmurt language in daily communications as well as the diversity of its language registers: humour (including a taste for metaphors and proverbs), daily family conversations, declarations of love, arguments, and of course, songs. It is quite probable that some of the film's audience was not Udmurt and not even interested in Udmurt culture. People went to see the film because it was good, entertaining, with beautiful pictures of Udmurtia. This film enjoyed huge success partly because its purpose was to create group cohesion. It used the same kind of strategy that Buranovskiye Babushki did: both used global cultural codes, which have nothing to do with ethnicity, but which enabled it to be appreciated by a great number of people, not only Udmurt, but also people from other nationalities (for example, Russians or Tatars).

## CONCLUSIONS

The atmosphere of terror of the 1930s subsided to some extent after Stalin's death in 1953 and more sharply in the 1990s following the era of *perestroika*. However, the assimilation process remained active and never ceased to cause damage, as has been reflected by Russian census results since 1926.

In the contemporary period, global modernisation in society has had consequences in Udmurtia (as elsewhere) from expansive rural depopulation and rural exodus, especially for the younger generations. Nonetheless, traditional culture perseveres in villages, even if less vigorously. In any case, in Izhevsk, emerging expressions of identity continue at the initiative of urban ethnic activists, but the political, social and economic situation limits their expression and growth. Indeed, the Udmurt ethnic activists do not achieve statutory socio-professional recognition: cultural promotion actions do not create gainful employment and the young generations of Udmurts do not hold powerful positions in influential sectors (for example the political and economic sectors),<sup>45</sup> based mainly in Izhevsk. That is why, using the means offered by modernisation, they move their activities to other territories, both virtually through the use of the Internet in order to overcome social and political constraints of being anchored in the territory of Udmurtia, and through either temporary or permanent exile. Statutory recognition, including the professionalisation of art and research activities based in Udmurt ethnic activism, is critical to the preservation and development of Udmurt identity. Also crucial to this identity project are the Finno-Ugric countries of Europe that receive and fund the research of Udmurt students through academic structures such as CIMO (the Centre for International Mobility) in Finland and the Kindred Peoples Programmes in Estonia.

Having said that, what is the meaning of ethnic activism when it is mainly expressed through the Internet and when the activists have to move to foreign countries to get jobs in the domain of cultural development?

## NOTES

1 The Komi-Permyak Autonomous Okrug, where Finno-Ugric people were more than 50 per cent of the population, was combined with Perm Oblast to form Perm Krai in 2005. The current share of Komi-Permyaks in the population of the region is less than four per cent.

2 Ethnic activists are people who work actively for the preservation and adaptation of the Udmurt traditions. There are also other people whose goal is not the revitalisation of Udmurt culture but who live according to the Udmurt way of life (language and religion).

3 I was able to stay two or three days with some informants, living with them and trying to catch the moment when they talk about their feeling of membership to the Udmurt community, features recognised as Udmurt, and references to the Soviet or pre-Soviet period and particular personalities.

4 Personal communication with Svetlana Edygarova, an Udmurt philologist at the University of Helsinki, on the occasion of the Udmurt language course in Paris, October 10–18, 2013.

5 In Udmurt, *асиӧдон* and *асвалан* are always used with a possessive suffix.

6 Including more than 30 interviews with Udmurt people talking about what they consider as their identity.

7 12 volumes have been published between 1990 and 2009.

8 Social and political events of the 20th century also had effects on Udmurt identity building, but in this chapter the author refers to what Udmurts themselves mentioned as part of their identity.

9 According to the 2010 Russian Census, there were 552,299 Udmurts in Russian Federation: 410,584 were living in Udmurtia, and 141,715 outside of the Udmurt Republic.

10 This administrative unit was founded on 4 November 1920. At that moment Udmurts were called Votyaks. The territory was renamed the Udmurt Autonomous Oblast in 1932.

11 Except the Mordvins.

12 According to the 2010 Russian Census (Rosstat 2010), among the 1,521,400 inhabitants of Udmurtia, 62.2 per cent were Russians (912,539 inhabitants), 28 per cent Udmurts (410,584 inhabitants) and 6.7 per cent Tatars (98,831 inhabitants).

13 For example, Kuzebay Gerd, the leading Udmurt poet, was in charge of the Communist Party's newspaper *Gudyri*.

14 That balance was reversed in the second half of the decade.

15 In Udmurt: *Удмурт Елькун* (Udmurt El'kun).

16 According to the ARENA Survey (2012) in the Volga Federal District, about 50 per cent of the population adhere to the Russian Orthodox Church, 20 per cent are Muslims (the Volga region is, after Caucasus, the second largest Muslim region of Russia) and smaller parts of the population adhere to different forms of local animist religion.

17 As a consequence of the occupation of Kazan by Ivan IV, the entire territory settled by the Udmurt people came under Russian domination.

18 Toulouze presents the different strategies put into practice by the Russian state towards the Northern Udmurts and the Southern Udmurts. Moreover, the Christianisation process concerns not only the Udmurts, but also all the Volga region people. (Toulouze 2000: 100–127)

19 For example domestic objects, doors and windows of houses were voluntarily broken (Sadakov 1949: 12).



20 Toulouze (2000: 112) gives the example of a ceremony in which a horse was sacrificed according to Udmurt ritual, although it then received holy water and Christian prayers.

21 The affair is called by the name of the village where the initial event happened, *Vuzh Multan* means 'Old Multan' in Udmurt.

22 This abbreviation refers to the Union for Liberation of Finnish People.

23 In English 'News of the War' and 'Thunder'.

24 For example, today, Kuzebay Gerd is considered the national poet.

25 It was not only the liquidation of the Udmurt intelligentsia, but also Mordvin (for example, Mikhail Markelov) and Komi (Ilya Vas') intellectuals.

26 The Organisation of State Security (OGPU), founded in 1923, became in 1934 the People Commissariat for Domestic Affairs (NKVD).

27 These two points are evident in the interviews with Udmurt people carried out in 2009–2010, and also in Udmurt folklore.

28 Personal communication with Svetlana Edygarova on the occasion of the Udmurt language course in Paris, October 10–18, 2013.

29 The first program involved all the Udmurt speakers. It aimed to boost bilingualism and popularised Udmurt language by publishing books in Udmurt and encouraging media dissemination (local press, TV and radio broadcasting). A mid-term survey has shown that in 2007 only 19 books were published (50,000 copies).

30 The new programme, with funding of 80 million roubles, is addressed to the youngest Udmurts and aims to publish children's books, although the problem of the distribution system operators remains unsolvable: there are no books in Udmurt in the town's bookshops.

31 For details on the current education system in the Udmurt Republic, see Zamyatin 2012.

32 For example, the Law of the Udmurt Republic On People's Education of 31 January 1996. For further details see Zamyatin 2013.

33 There were 346 national schools in 1991 and 425 in 1998, while in 2006 there were 403 national schools in Udmurtia.

34 One department of the University was devoted to Udmurt studies earlier but it was closed in the 1950s.

35 Including the creation of contemporary clothes inspired by traditional sewing and design techniques.

36 *Shundy* means 'sun' in Udmurt. This association is the youth national organisation emanating from the Kenesh and Demen associations.

37 These were Valeriy Sidorov, Tatyana Kornilova, both TV journalists, Gennadiy Bekmakov, artist at the Udmurt theatre, and Nadezhda Utkina, musician and singer.

38 *Iumshan* means 'happiness party' in Udmurt.

39 Ethno-futurism is an artistic and literary movement born in Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s:

Etymologically, it refers with *ethnos* to minority peoples, whose national existence is at stake or at least threatened by assimilation politics by states or multinational enterprises. 'Ethnos' means a little people or nation with own traditions and culture, which lives under pressure of greater peoples, let's say Russians [...]. *Futurism* does not anymore point out the modernist aesthetic program at the beginning of our century [...], but it means hope for future, for a new life, where peoples can develop their culture by means of their own language and traditions. (Sallamaa 1999)

40 *Kechjöl zhyt'ës* means 'the nights of common sowthistle', a yellow flower (*Sonchus*) of the Udmurt countryside.

41 "It is easier to ban a speech at the individual level, but much more difficult in the global and automatic context of the Internet" (Cagnoli 2012: 12).

42 Globalisation is defined by David Held and his co-authors as following:

Globalization refers to the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnection. It can be located on a continuum with the local, national and regional and can be taken to refer to those spatial-temporal processes of change which underpin a transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents. A satisfactory definition of globalization must capture each of these elements: extensity (stretching), intensity, velocity and impact. (Held et al. 1999: 14)

43 *Opa val no skal* means 'neither cows nor horses' and refers to a more bountiful past.

44 *Uzy Bory* means 'berry-strawberries' in Udmurt. This movie was directed by Pyotr Palgan based on a story by Darali Leli. It is available on YouTube in Udmurt with Russian, Estonian and French subtitles.

45 It seems to me that the sector of media is an exception. I noticed that some young Udmurts have interesting positions in Udmurt media companies (press and TV). This specific situation will be analysed in another article.

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