

The collective identity of the Mari

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1. Introduction

„Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people’s understanding of themselves and others” (Stekelenburg 2013: 219). In „understanding who we are”, Klandermans and de Weerd (2000) distinguish between individual personal and collective group levels. For the individual level, these authors relied on Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) argument that every person has one personal and several social identities. While *personal* refers to self-definition in terms of personal attributes, *social* implies self-definition in terms of social category memberships. Collective identity concerns „the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor – Whittier 1992, as cited by Stekelenburg 2013: 1).

A similar interpretation of the term *collective identity* is held by David and Bar-Tal (2009), who outline micro- and macro-levels of collective identity. Micro level collective identity is an individual’s self-categorization within a group, while macro level refers to the identity of „the group as a whole, including shared beliefs, attitudes and behavioral patterns” (Ehala 2015: 1).

This paper focuses on collective identity formation among the Mari, a Finno-Ugric minority group in Russia, who co-exist with the dominant Russian as well as other ethnic groups. Although residing in part of Russia for five centuries, the Mari have succeeded in maintaining a distinct collective identity, however their identity has undergone some changes resulting in a gradual Russian assimilation. The aim of this research was to analyze the collective identity of the Mari, based on the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala 2007, 2015) and focusing on the phenomenon at the macro level which allows to determine the dynamics of collective identity development of Mari people in the Russian society.



2. Method of study

The current study is based on the data collected using the 60-item questionnaire in a large-scale survey of ethnolinguistic vitality in Mari El conducted in 2013–2014. The questionnaire was administered to 115 informants living in Mari El, of whom 95 self-identified as Mari and 20 as Russians. Only ethnic Mari were included in this sample.

Despite the aim of representativeness, the initial Mari sample was over-represented by people with higher education, city residents, females and middle-aged people. Therefore, 31 respondents were excluded to make the sample composition closer to the real sociodemographic composition of the Mari ethnic group. This smaller sample (N = 59) was used in analyses as a reflection of the sociodemographic composition of the Mari population in Mari El represented in Table 1. In addition, this sample (N = 59) allowed to receive a more precise results in calculation of the subjective vitality of Maris (Ehala – Vedernikova 2015).

Category	Population 291,000 (%)	Sample N = 59 (%)
Males	46	20
Females	54	80
City residents	23	32
Township residents	16	22
Rural residents	60	46
Higher education	15	27
Secondary education	48	68
Basic education	37	5

Table 1.

Sociodemographic composition of Mari ethnicity and the sample

As the table shows, the sample is still over-represented by females and underrepresented by people with basic education. As for gender, the one-way between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA) had shown no statistically significant differences in terms of analyzed variables for males and females. Therefore one can state that it is unlikely for the gender bias in the sample to compromise the results. However, there is still some underrepresentation of the Mari with basic education that might have some effect on the mean scores for the subjective vitality in the sample to some extent. In this case Ehala – Vedernikova (2015) state that statistically proven generalisations for the whole Mari population in Mari El as well as results of analysis in the

context of other related variables of ethnolinguistic vitality should be interpreted with a caution.

The whole structure of the questionnaire was developed in accordance with the theoretical model of ethnolinguistic vitality by Ehala (2010) which specifies four components: perceived strength differential (PSD), perceived intergroup discordance (D), perceived intergroup distance (R) and the level of utilitarianism (U). In our study we used the data from the last two parts (U and R) measuring individual network of linguistic contacts and cultural orientation of respondents in analyzing linguistic and ethnic identities of Maris. The R-part contains 10 questions elaborated by Landry – Allard – Henry (1996); the second U-part has 10 statements inspired by the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz – Melech – Lehmann – Burgess – Harris – Owens 2001) which were incorporated into ethnolinguistic vitality questionnaire. Responses of the respondents were measured by 7-point Likert scale. Both scales possessed high internal consistency. The collected data were processed by the statistical package SPSS (version 14.0).

The quantitative survey was complemented by qualitative research: it included 27 open-ended interviews in Mari El (2013–2014) on two issues. The interview protocols were developed to get in-depth information about interconnection of religion and native language, culture and mother tongue. Both kinds of interviews included 19 questions, of which 10 were about language choice of interviewees in various situations and, 9 thematically-related issues.

3. Sign theory of identity

According to the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala 2007, 2015), collective identity functions as a social sign, which aims „to structure the social world and legitimize the distribution of power and resources between the members of different subgroups of society” (2015: 2). At the macro level collective identity has dual characteristics: signal (features, by which identity becomes empirically perceivable) and meaning (a continuum of a socially set of core values characteristic to this particular collective identity) sides. At the micro level collective identity is represented as the association an individual has to a particular collective identity. This association consists of two links: to the signal and to the meaning sides of identity. The strength of these links varies and thus determines more or less central position of collective identity in a person’s self-conception (Figure 1 for this author’s graphical representation of the structure of collective identity):

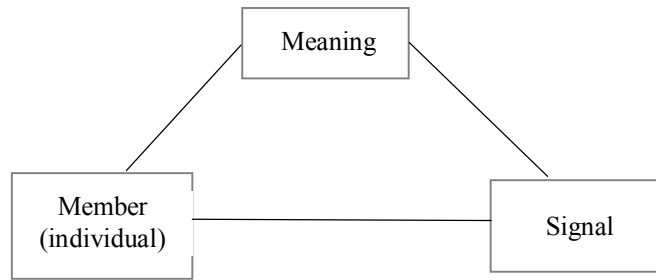


Figure 1.

The tripartite structure of collective identity

In interpreting the given diagram (Figure 1), on the macro level collective identity is represented as a shared mental representation of the attributes related to the signal and the meaning sides. *Signal* implies the features (e.g. behavior, language, skin color) by which members of a group can be easily recognized and perceived by others; *meaning* relates to a set of core values (common history, ancestry) associated with this identity. As stated by Ehala (2015), connection between the signals and meanings is a certain indicator of the existence of a social sign, i.e. of collective identity. At the micro level, collective identity is the connection of an individual and a collective identity as a social sign. Thus, each individual has or develops connection to the signal and the meaning sides of a particular collective identity. The signal indicates the salience of features for identity (e.g. skin color, first language) and meaning represents emotional attachment to the collective identity, which is expressed via internalization of the identity content by the member. Both connections can vary in strength, indicating the significance of the particular identity for an individual and the degree of emotional attachment to the group, which in turn is reflected in the development of collective identity.

4. An introduction to the Mari

Maris belong to the Volgaic branch of the Uralic language family; their homeland is in the central part of Russia. The current number of Maris in Russia is approximately 312,000 people¹ (Lalukka 2024). The official territory of the Mari is the Mari El Republic, which has a population of 672,321,

¹ One should mention that the exact number of Mari in Russia currently is the subject of debate.

of which 45.4% are ethnic Maris and the other 54.6% represent Russians and other ethnic groups (NS 2022).

The state languages of Mari El are Mari and Russian. Despite the official status, the Mari language has limited usage in the region: it is neither a language of instruction (though it is taught as a separate subject in 80% of schools) nor a language of business or administrative communication. Nineteen periodicals (KG 2022) and approximately 30–45 books (a total of more than 45,000 copies) are published annually in the Mari language (Chuksin 2009; Vasiutina 2009). The Mari language is actively used on web-pages (MariUver on <https://mariuver.wordpress.com/>; Республика Марий Эл El on <http://mari-el.name/>) and social networks (e.g. *Чыласе марий-влак, ушныза!*, *Марий улам – марла ойлем!* on <http://vkontakte.ru/>; Тый марий улат мо? on <http://odnoklassniki.ru/>). There is Mari-language television but with limited broadcasting time (approximately 4.4 hours per week of news and programs)² and full-time radio broadcasting. Cultural events in Mari (literature, theater and folk music) are rather frequent (according to annual reports of the Ministry of Culture, yearly total average number reaches 300).

The history of the Mari in Russia started during the 16th century, when the territory of the Mari was annexed to the Russian state³ (Bakhtin 2012). Through the centuries the governmental policy towards ethnic minorities in tsarist Russia (forced Christianization, beginning of Russification) and returning to Russification in Soviet time (at the end of the 30s) caused closer contacts between the two peoples. During the 1990s the former Mari ASSR (as it was officially titled from 1936 to 1990) was officially recognized as a republic – with its own right to self-determination – largely as a result of high activism by the Mari. In recent years the political activity of the Mari has declined significantly, mainly due to the different political stances of the local authorities, which manifested in reluctance of supporting a Mari ethnic movement (Shamiev 2010; Knorre – Konstantinova 2013).

² Although Ehala & Vedernikova (2015) reported unlimited radio broadcasting time in the Mari language, the situation has changed with a reduction of radio broadcasting in Mari.

³ Some subgroups of Mari were either forcefully annexed to Russian princedoms much earlier (in the 9th–12th centuries) and underwent full ethnic assimilation, or voluntarily joined the Russian state, such as the Hill Mari subgroup in the 16th century (Bakhtin 2012).

5. Mari ethnic identity

There are various approaches to determining the properties of ethnic identity. For instance, in social psychology ethnic identity implies cultural norms and values, group strength, prominence and subjective meaning (Zagefka 2009). Lalluka (1990) stressed three main properties of ethnic identity: unique past; common historical traditions; cultural affinity (summarized by Abizadeh (2001) as common ancestral, social and cultural or national experience).

According to the sign approach to identity (Ehala 2015), the existence of all these concepts in the meaning part of the identity sign is determinative for ethnicity. Out of those numerous properties characterizing ethnic group, only one, a sense of belonging together historically, through common descent, history and fate, is necessary for a collective identity to have potential to function as an ethnic identity. It implies the existence of the following concepts: shared history and descent, historical homeland, common language, religion and cultural practices.

Following the theory of Ehala (2015), one can surely state that all these properties are characteristic to collective identity of the Mari: there is the sense of common history and descent, the Mari language, traditional religion and cultural practices as folk events – such as *Peledysh pairem* (an annual folk feast), *Shorykjol* (folk Christmas celebration) and *Üyarnya* (a folk analogue of Russian Mardi Gras). But the point is that overtime some of those core values have either transformed into signals or ‘strengthened/ weakened’ their meaning. Such a conclusion can be drawn from the following facts.

First, Mari El is traditionally considered the Mari’s historical homeland, despite the fact that only 52% of all Maris live there (NS 2012). This concept is also strong in the settlements of Mari diaspora in Russia (in the Perm region and Bashkortostan and Tatarstan republics etc.), though during the last centuries these groups of Mari have shared history with other ethnic groups (Sepeyev 2005; Vostrikov – Sanukov – Kazimov 2005; Luzin 2011). It means that all the Mari, born and living outside of the Mari El region have a knowledge of Mari homeland, the place where their ancestors had lived but for some historical reasons left a few centuries ago (Sanukov 1992).

According to the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala 2015), the concept of common descent – which is obligatory for every ethnic identity – is supported in two ways: through inter-generational transmission of collective identity; and member conversion. Inter-generational transmission is how Maris secure their continuity, while the second one is non typical for people due to negative distinctiveness from the outgroup (Russians) in the social aspect. As

mentioned by Fearon – Laitin (2000), „In deciding a person’s ethnicity, we do not need to know anything about his or her cultural habits, mother tongue, religion or beliefs of any sort. Rather, we simply need to know about parentage. In ordinary usage, to ask „What is her ethnicity?” is to ask about what ethnic group her parents (or other close ancestors) were assigned to [...]” (13).

Despite the questioning attitude to the statement about a small part of native language, religion and culture in determination of a person’s ethnic affiliation, in case of Mari, parentage is a very significant factor. According to Soloviev (2012) and Sibatrova (2012), the descendants of those who consider themselves as Mari also identify themselves as Mari, as transmission of the attributes (language, cultural traditions) that qualify them for membership of this ethnic group are maintained. This continuation is often interrupted in inter-ethnic families, as many opt for either Russian, Tatar or any other ethnic group than Mari. As stated by Lallukka (1990), such a tendency is also typical for other East Finnic minorities (Mordva, Komi) and is one of factors of their assimilation (241).

Another concept, the Mari language, might seem a single feature of ethnic identity due to the emphasize some put on the maintenance of a traditional language, for example, according to Anderson (1979), the loss of a traditional language „will be equated to the loss of group identity” (68). However, on the basis of empirical data, one can state about some discrepancy between the picture, presented by language activists, and the real situation. According to the 2010 Census data (NS 2012), 24% of the population of Mari El who identified themselves as Mari were Russian speakers. The interviewees (N=27) in this current study agreed that even those with no command of the mother tongue are perceived by others as still Mari, which was exemplified by some passages from interviews:

1) *Марий шке йылмыжым ок пале гын... Ну, тиде пеш начар, но тудо садыгак марий улеш. Конешне, национальность денже тудо марий, вет марий ешыште шочын* (Владимир, 49 ияш). ‘If a person does not know Mari... Well, that is sad, but he is still Mari. Undoubtedly ethnically he is Mari, as he was born in a Mari family’ (Vladimir, 49 y.o.).

2) *Шке йылме дене кутырымаш... тиде пеш чот кӱлешан, молан манаш гын, мый вот колам, кузе марий-шамыч... рушла кутырат, вет? Нуно как бы марий улыт: патриот-шамыч, шке калыкым йӱратат да тулеч молат [...] но нуно ала-кузе неполноценный улыт [...] Объективно нуно марий улыт... но ала-можжо ок сите.* (Дмитрий, 30 лет) ‘Of course,

communication in the native language... is very important, because I hear Russian-speaking... by Maris, right? They are kind of Maris: they are patriotic, they state about their love to their people and so on [...] but they seem to be somehow inferior [...] objectively, they are Mari... but something is lacking' (Dmitriy, 30 y.o.).

Finally, according to the research of Ehala – Vedernikova (2015), the linguistic factor is not a determinant of an ethnic shift among the Mari, which allows one to suggest that its role as a core value in ethnic identity construction is peculiar. Such an assumption is supported by statistical data that contradicts some postulates of ethnolinguistic vitality theory (Ehala 2010). Thus, statistical analysis has shown that there is no correlation between the linguistic network of the Mari (R_1) and cultural similarity (R_2). So, the assumption that „the more the minority members use the majority language in their everyday life the more similarly they perceive themselves culturally, religiously and racially” does not work in this context (Ehala – Vedernikova 2015: 3). Indeed, it means that the role of language in the cultural self-determination of the Mari is low. Second, a significant negative correlation of R_1 and R_2 with distrust D^4 (for R_1 $\rho = -0.20$, $p = 0.058$, and for R_2 $\rho = -0.36$, $p < 0.01$) shows that the higher the level of linguistic and cultural similarities of Maris to Russians, the less they trust the majority Russians (Ehala – Vedernikova 2015).

This tendency has a social rationale, as urban, longer more educated and, having higher earning Maris fall into this category. The negative attitude amongst the majority seems to be the main reason why more socially successful Mari people are more distrustful towards the majority and perceive interethnic situation as less legitimate than less successful Maris (Ehala – Vedernikova 2015).

Consequently, urban Maris – who are more integrated linguistically and culturally into the majority environment – are expected to have a more trustful attitude towards the Russian majority than their rural conspecifics, which is supposed to facilitate their social mobility. However, the unreadiness of the Russian majority to accept the minority Maris causes intergroup discordance (Ehala – Vedernikova 2015), slowing down ethnic identity shift and depreciating the significance of the linguistic factor. The presented evidence gives grounds to the supposition that at present the Mari language gradually

⁴ D-factor shows intergroup discordance shows legitimacy of intergroup power relations as well as trust of ingroup to outgroup (Ehala 2010; 2012).

ceases to be a core value of Mari ethnic identity, but at the same time it does not function as a signal, which is exemplified by the large number of Maris (69, 840 people) who do not speak their mother tongue. The role of religion, particularly of Mari traditional religion (MTR), is rather high in collective identification of those Mari who practice it (Shkalina 2003). The MTR, the essence of which is in worshipping natural forces in special places (holy groves) and time, has roots in ancient times and in the past (until the 16^s century) had been one of the determinants of collective identity (Bakhtin 2012). However, forced Christianization between the 17th and 19th centuries resulted in an emergence of Mari Christians and double believers, i.e. those who followed both religious traditions (Popov 2005; Jagafova 2010). All three religious groups have preserved so far, though, according to Orlova (2010) the proportion of Maris in each group strongly varies: 14% of MTR followers; 67.3% Mari Christians and double believers.⁵ However, the question here is whether both religions pertain to the meaning part of the identity sign (i.e. if they are both core values) or to the signal.

The interviewing of members of three religious groups of Maris (Chimariy, i.e. followers of MTR, Christians and double-believers) concerning the effect of religion on their self-identification showed that three religious identities of Mari people are unequal in terms of ethnic identity construction. Three responses – one from each group – exemplify the importance of concept of religion [both Mari traditional and Christian] for collective identity formation among the Mari.

4) *Тиде мемнан чисте марий верана улеш. Тиде ме, марий, улына, молан манаиш гын, кунам ме кўсотыи толына, ме кумалына веле огыл, но икте-весына дене мутланена. Ен-шамыч икте-весыит дене... чоныит дене лишыл улыт [...] Тиде мемнан, кузе гала, марий шўлыи, характеран, вет? Тыге ме тышке толына да чотрак марий ала-мо лийына.* (Дмитрий, 30 лет) ‘It is our pure Mari belief. And this is us, Mari, because when we worship [in the grove] we do not only pray, but communicate with one another ... people are spiritually closer [...] That is our, how to say, Mari spirit, character, right? So, we come here and feel ourselves as more Mari, in the real sense of the world’ (Dmitriy, 30 y.o., MTR follower).

5) *Конечне, марий вера, тиде мемнан кугезе-шамычын вераит. Тиде ме, марий улына. Да, мый Семеновский черкыш коштам. Но кунам кўсотыи толам... мый шкендым ала-кузе весынак шижам, манаиш ли-*

⁵ No sources give the exact number of double believers.

еш... Кунам тынар шуко мари-влак йыр улыт, мый... шкендым утларак мари-влак ала-мо шижам. (Татьяна, 42 года) ‘Undoubtedly, Mari belief is the belief of our Mari ancestors. This is we, Mari... yes, I also attend Semenovskaya [Orthodox] church. When I go to worship [to the grove]... I feel myself different... when so many Mari are around I feel as if I become more Mari than before’ (Tatyana, 42 y.o., a double believer).

6) *На самом деле, я не могу сказать, помогает ли христианство чувствовать себя больше мари-земляком [...] Конечно, есть много мари-христиан, но я не вижу никакого эффекта от этого на наше национальное самосознание... Я бы скорее сказала „нет”...* (Екатерина, 27 лет) ‘Indeed, I can not tell whether being a Christian helps us being more Mari [...] Of course, there are a lot of Mari Christians, but I do not see it has any effect on our national [ethnic] self-awareness... I would rather say to you ‘no’...’ (Ekaterina, 27 y.o., Orthodox Christian).

Based on the interview data one can see that relationship of two religious identities, Mari traditional and Christian, to ethnic identity is different. Correspondingly, the religious identities of double-believers (traditional religion and Christian), which co-exist successfully also relate differently to ethnic identity of the Mari (see Figure 3):

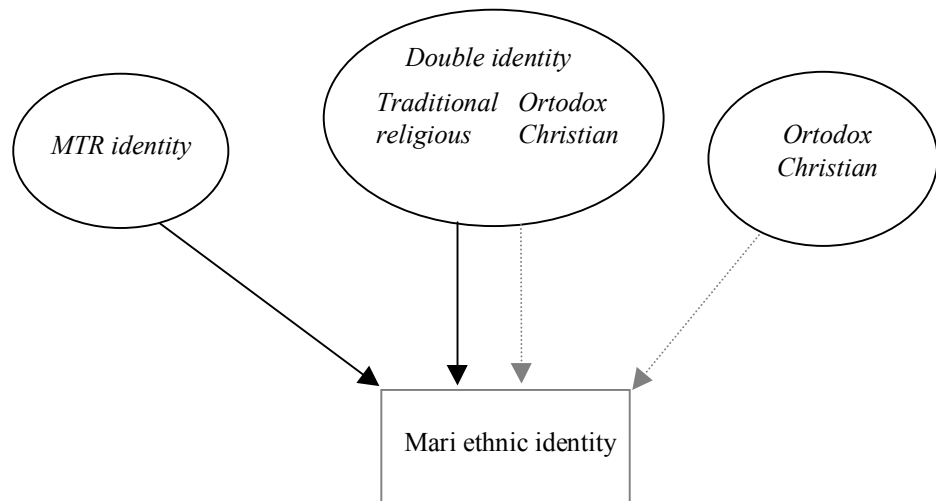


Figure 3.

Relationships between Maris' religious identities and their ethnic identity

As Figure 3 shows, MTR has a direct association with Mari people, (expressed with full line), one can surely state that it is one of its strongest core values of *Chimaris* (traditional believers) and double believers. Regarding Christian Mari, all the participants (N = 27) admitted that „*a christened Mari is also Mari*”, which testifies that the so-called „Rush vera” (translated as „Russian religion”) is not opposed by modern Mari people but in the 19th century such opposition existed (Popov 2005). Discourse analysis of the interview data has revealed an absence of direct association between ethnic Mari and religious (Christian) identities. That allows one to suppose that Christianity is not a core value of Mari identity, but just one of ethnic values people put on the importance of actions and life, but which is irrespective to any ethnic group.

Third, regarding cultural practices, it is necessary to focus on those cultural traditions, which are related to religious practices such as historical events *Shorykjol* and *Üyarnya*. Both practices contain cultural component (folk songs, dancing, games) and religious components (some religious ceremonies) which indicates that the ethnic and religious identities of the Mari have a point of contact in it, as it has been stated before, religion is one of the core values of Mari. Consequently, pertaining of the religious component to the meaning part of ethnic identity provides the viability of these traditions themselves. As for the Maris’ cultural traditions which do not contain a religious component their gradual vanishing and almost complete loss in some near urban areas of the Mari EI testifies to their different relation in the identity sign. In order to understand that we address some empirical data. Thus, survey questioning (N = 59) allowed to reveal that, on the whole the Mari are positive to the issue of the maintenance and following the traditions. Thus, 93.2% of respondents (N = 59) supported the statement „*It is necessary to retain Mari traditions and try to follow them*” and 96% of informants agreed on „*More cultural events promoting Mari language and culture should be held in Mari EI*”. Besides Mari cultural development is actively supported in Mari EI which is exemplified by frequent cultural events in the region (up to 300 a year). However, they have hardly an essential effect on the collective identity of the Mari as those events generate only temporary interest of native population, particularly among younger generation. In order to understand the reason for this discrepancy between reality and desire, one can address the statistical data of Ehala – Vedernikova (2015).

Analysis of cultural orientation of Maris in the framework of the investigation of ethnolinguistic vitality has shown that modern Maris are more inclined to traditionalism (Tr, the mean value was 0.80) – the principles of

which are clearly described in the theory of Scollon – Scollon (1995). They are: 1) the essence of human is emotional; 2) notion of ‘good’ is set by moral authorities; and 3) values are defined by traditions; which accounts for the emotional attachment of the Mari people to their cultural heritage. At the same time analysis has a moderate level of utilitarianism of Maris (Ut, the mean value was 0.40, measured with the scale 0 = low ... 1 = high, as given in Ehala – Vedernikova (2015), which main principles involve: 1) defining of humans as rationale economic entities; 2) determination of ‘good’ from a perspective of advantage/disadvantage; and 3) establishing values by statistical (quantitative) means. In interpreting the statistical results, one can state that despite positive attitude that Maris express to the issue of maintenance of cultural traditions, people are rather pragmatic in reality. It should be pointed out that such a standpoint of Maris is independent of any sociodemographic factors. One-way ANOVA analysis has shown no statistically significant results of Ut and Tr between gender, age, educational level, place of living and financial status of Maris, which hypothetically might be the determinants of their traditionalist or utilitarianism approaches to the ethnic issue. This is not surprising, as the blurring of lines between the social categories of Maris in the context of their cultural orientation is evident. It is manifested, for example, in the fact that the place of living (village and city) is not a significant factor of people’s position to the ethnic issue as before due to increased migration of native population. So, they are those utilitarian values that justify the dominance of the pragmatic approach of Maris to some ethnic issues (e.g. native language teaching, maintenance of culture). Such a conclusion is complemented by some passages from the interviews conducted for the present study:

7) *Положительное влияние этих культурных мероприятий, конечно же, есть, но не так сильно, как хотелось бы.* (Ксения, 20 лет) ‘The positive effect of cultural events on Maris is evident, but not so much as was expected. It is temporal’ (Ksenia, 20 y.o.).

8) *Да, эти мероприятия – все это хорошо, но... толку-то от них мало. А почему? Да потому, что это все искусственно. Это все наносное, не истинное, марийское. Ну, естественно, мы все радуемся, когда приходим на такие мероприятия, говорим по-марийски, чувствуем гордость [...] А потом что? Вышли из ДК, и опять говорим по-русски. Нету этого у нас больше... Эти традиции, которые пытаются воспроизвести на сцене, от них толку мало. Все дело как раз в нас, в марийцах, мы изменились. Мы другое поколение. Наши ценности изменились.*

(Олег, 65 лет) ‘Sure, all these events are good but... it is of small use. And why? Because it is all artificial. It is all alien, not authentic Mari [...]. Well, it is natural for us to be happy, when attending these events, feel pride. And what then? On exiting DK,⁶ we again speak Russian. These traditions, that try to reconstruct a scene, have a small effect on us... it’s all about us, Maris. We have changed. We belong to a different generation. Our values just have changed’ (Oleg, 65 y.o.).

It allows to conclude that at present cultural traditions of Maris are a kind of symbolism, i.e. bearing the characteristics of a signal of identity rather than of a core value. That accounts for why the attempts to revive them have short term effect on Maris’ self-assessment and why they gradually die.

6. National identity of the Mari

When referring to national identity, it is first necessary to make a clear distinction between ethnic national and civic national identities. While ethnic national is close to ethnic identity, i.e. possessing concepts of common ancestry, homeland and or language with a complementary association to the notion of a state, civic national indicates a „vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance to the civil state” (Geerts 1963, as cited in Ehala 2015). According to Guibernau (2004) and Ehala (2015), the concept of sovereignty that a particular collective identity has as core value, is a certain characteristic of a nation.

At present Maris do not claim the right to rule themselves, i.e. the concept of sovereignty is not appropriate to people. There was a period when it (i.e. concept of sovereignty) existed, exemplified by the *Cheremiss wars* of independence in the second half of the 16th century (Borovikov 2012; Svechnikov 2005). However, annexation to the Russian state and further oppressive tsarist policies to minority peoples of the Volgaic area resulted in Maris giving up this idea and a gradual change from possessing ethnic national identity to ethnic identity. Such a conclusion can be drawn from the history of Mari. Thus, in the 17th and 18th centuries Mari people actively participated in all-Russian rebellions; and in the 17th the Mari began their mass migration to eastern territories. These facts testify to a struggle of Maris for their independence, though they are interpreted by some historians (e.g. Svechnikov 2005; Vostrikov – Sanukov – Kazimov 2005) as a protest against the oppressive tsarist regime. Further strengthening of tsarist policy against the peasantry and particularly the Mari (Svechnikov 2005) influenced gradual transformation

⁶ DK is an abbreviation of Dom Kultury, a city concert hall and community center.

of their ethnic national identity into ethnic identity by dropping the idea of sovereignty. In the 19th century a high integration of Maris into the Russian economic and political system was evident (Vostrikov – Sanukov – Kazimov 2005), which indicates their acceptance of being a part of Russia, that in its turn testifies to the existence of their civic national identity. It strengthened in the 20th, particularly, in the Soviet period in the context of „Soviet identity” formation policy.

Language revitalization during the 1990s made Maris close to emergence of ethnic national identity. Official recognition of the Mari El Republic granted the Mari some legal freedom to conduct their own policies (adoption of their own constitution, establishing state languages). Attributes such as a regional anthem, flag and emblem symbolized a new phase in the Maris’ lives, and were signals with a strong connection to the meaning part (concept of sovereignty). Despite a clear understanding of the geopolitical impossibility of separating from the federal state, the idea of creating a prototypical „ethnic state inside a state” with relative sovereignty to conduct ethnic policies was rather strong during the 1990s, the more so as it was actively supported by kindred Finno-Ugric states – Estonia and Finland (Ivanov 2013). However, decreasing of political activity of Maris by the end of the 90s (Shamiev 2010) meant the loss of the opportunity by the Mari to achieve the set goals which, in its turn, prevented the development of ethnic identity into ethnic national identity. In the context of current low ethnic activism of Maris the signs of nationhood in Mari El are supposed to be just signals with weak or no meaning sides in the collective identity of the Mari.

The issue of civic national identity among the Mari, indeed, is an unexplored phenomenon as there are no research works related to this issue. However, on the basis of some common ethnic processes, one can make some important conclusions. First, there is a high rate of assimilation of Finno-Ugric and other minorities in Russian, mainly because of weakening ethnic self-identification, as „people tend to choose their native language and have their cultural identity disregarding their ethnic affiliation” (Shabaev – Sadokhin 2013: 116). There is a good reason to believe in a significant identification shift in the cultural orientation of minorities, with the Russian language associated with the progress. According to some research (Byzov 2007; RN 2011), all-Russian civic identity turns into a more considerable identification feature that co-exists successfully with ethnic identity of minorities in Russia. Regarding Mari one can surely state that for most people,

self-identification as Mari and Rossiyanin⁷ is typical, as exemplified with the words of an interviewee:

9) *Да, мы мари́йцы, отдельная нация, со своим языком и культурой, уникальной, между прочим [...] Но, как бы сказать, мы в то же самое время – часть России, россияне. мы принадлежим ей. Мы как бы отдельно, но все равно вместе. Все.* (Вера, 27 лет) ‘We Mari, are people with our own language, culture. By the way, unique [...] but, at the same time, we are part of Russia, we are Russians [Rossiyane]. We belong to it [i.e. Russia]. It is like we are separate, but at the same time together. Everybody’ [Vera, 27 y.o.)

The connection between the signal (Russian flag, anthem, language) and meaning sides (territory and sovereignty) has been purposely strengthened by Russian state policy (RN 2011). However, this process has had a negative effect on the formation of ethnic identity of the minority as „civic national identity is associated with ethnic majority, i.e. Russians (though indirectly), as minority representatives see no significant distinctions between all-Russian civil and Russian ethnic identities” (Shabaev – Sadokhin 2013: 119). This means that the strengthening of civic national identity stimulates an ethnic shift towards self-identifying as Russian among weak minorities in Russia. This conclusion is also applicable to the Mari, as the number of ethnic Maris self-identifying themselves as Russians has grown (Tishkov 2010).

7. Linguistic identity of Maris

According to the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala 2015), linguistic identity, in its prototypical form, has language as a signal but without core values attached. The classic example of it is the linguistic identity of Crimean Tatars, whose language shift was not followed by ethnic change despite their forceful assimilation in the Soviet period. However, it is typical that the emergence of new values in the linguistic identity associated with a new language is accounted for by a weakening of a person’s emotional attachment to his own ethnic identity (Ehala 2015).

The typical Mari is bilingual, speaking both Mari and Russian (98% of Mari); a small number (0.3%) are trilingual⁸ (NS 2012). The language Maris

⁷ „Rossianin” denotes a citizen of Russia. The term was first used by the 1st president of Russia, Boris Eltsin, to be applied irrespective of a person’s ethnic group.

⁸ Trilingualism amongst Maris mostly occurs in areas densely populated by Tatars (Moriki, Mari-Turek, Paranga districts) in Mari El.

choose to speak depends on a number of factors. First, a Mari's language choice is related to where they live. As seen from the Table 1, Mari is more commonly spoken in the countryside. The main reason for that is the domination of Mari population in the rural area (around 60% of Maris in Mari El) and relatively low rate of representatives of other ethnic groups (NS 2012). The present study has found that in urban and near-urban areas the rate of Russian speaking among Maris is higher which testify to their active language shift.

	Rural (%)			Urban (%)		
	<i>Only Mari</i>	<i>Mari and Russian</i>	<i>Only Russian</i>	<i>Only Mari</i>	<i>Mari and Russian</i>	<i>Only Russian</i>
<i>What language do you speak with ...</i>						
your family?	40.7	51.9	7.4	26.3	52.6	21.1
your friends?	25.9	66.7	7.4	5.3	68.4	26.3
your colleagues ?	14.8	74.1	11.1	–	73.7	26.3

Table 1.

Language choices of modern Maris in rural and urban areas (N = 59)

It was notable that despite migration of the Maris (and, thus, an increase in the number of Maris in urban areas, the rate of native speaking in urban areas is still low, which also testifies to their switching to Russian. The main reason for this phenomenon is relatively high rate of Russians (45% of Russians) and ethnically more diverse society (Sibatrova 2012) in urban and near urban area. Another reason, as admitted by Soloviev (2012) is that a rural Mari lifestyle is of prime importance for native population, which means that moving to a city is equal to abandoning their ethnic lifestyle, and thus language as an important component of their culture. Second, language shift is conditioned with their sphere of usage. As shown in Figure 7.1, Mari is mostly used in a person's own home (32%), with rates lower across other domains (e.g. 15.3% with friends, 10.2% with colleagues.), which is mainly caused by reduced institutional support in education, mass media and governmental services (Vedernikova 2013). The attitude of Mari to their mother tongue and the limited vocabulary of the Mari language (Soloviev 2012; Sibatrova 2012), often results in native speakers' shifting to Russian for some topics (e.g. scientific and public affairs). However, the usage of either language has a subjective rationale that can be established on basis of some empirical data. Thus, moderate positive correlation ($\rho=.558$, $p<0.01$) be-

tween the two statements „Mari is necessary for feeling myself culturally full regarding nation” and „Russian is necessary for feeling myself culturally full regarding nation” (Cronbach’s Alpha = .735) shows that Maris have a positive emotional attachment to the Russian language. That means that both linguistic identities of Maris (Russian and Mari) possess some core values and switching from one language to another involves a slight identity shift.

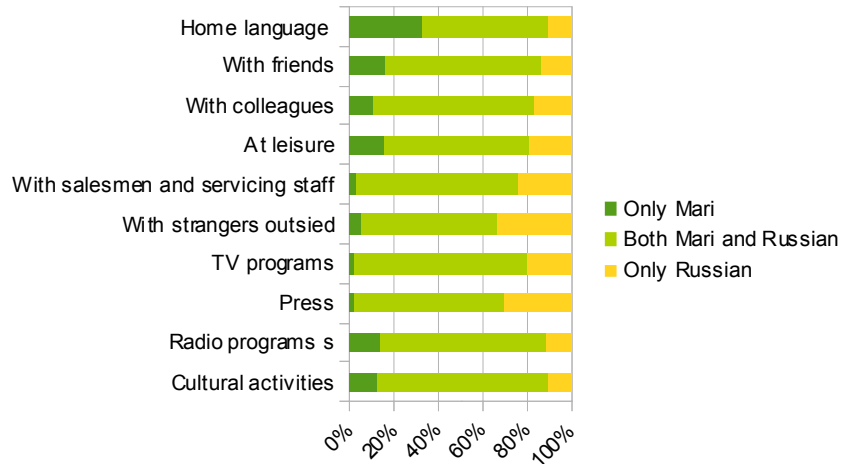


Figure 4.
Language choice of modern Mari (N = 59)

Taking into account the fact that modern Maris have a positive attachment to the Russian language – it is definitely associated with high culture and civilization for Maris and most other minorities in Russia (Ehala 2015) – one can state that the Russian linguistic identity of Maris is a prototype of Russian ethnic national identity, with the language as a signal and culture as a core value. This allows one to conclude that modern Mari have two ethnic identities: ethnic Mari and ethnic national Russian. Notably, the emergence of a second ethnic identity of Maris was caused by strengthening of the civic national identity of the Mari people during the Soviet period, which finally affected erosively the Mari ethnic identity and manifested in a gradual ethnic assimilation (3% every 25 years) that continues in the 21st century.

8. Blurring of the collective identities of the Mari

Based on the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala 2015), one can explain the phenomenon of the „blurring of collective identities” that is affected by two

properties of identity: density and distance. The density of identity is determined by the concentration level of cultural material in terms of signals and meaning. Thus, the Russian imperial identity is considered the densest, while the civic national identity is the simplest form because it requires small resources for its existence. *Distance* indicates the closeness of identities in terms of signals and common core values. For instance, the distance between ethnic and ethnic national identities is small, as they share the same social sign distinguished by one core value (the concept of sovereignty). The probability of the blurring of identities depends on the characteristics of these two properties: identities with low densities and a small distance are most likely to blur, but those with high densities and large distance are unlikely to do so (Ehala 2015).

The Mari are an example of the blurring of identities. On basis of this present study one can conclude that in the past, the Russian linguistic identity of Maris developed into a civic national identity, and further into an ethnic national Russian identity, a process which continues to this day. Theoretically, both the linguistic and civic national identities have a low density, but the large distance between them makes their blurring less likely. Both identities do not share core values and have only one similar signal, i.e. the Russian language. As the ethnic self-identification of Maris has been strong since the very recent past, and, thus direct ethnic shifting is hardly possible, so a strengthening of Russian linguistic identity was imaged on the Russian civic national identity of the Mari during the 20th century. As stated before, most Russian minorities have a positive emotional attachment to the Russian language, so the signal has become a core value and feature of ethnic national (and also ethnic) identity. Based on the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala 2015) one can surely state that the probability of the blurring of these two identities is increased by both identities (civic national and ethnic national) sharing the concept of sovereignty. The further process of ethnic shifting of the Maris is facilitated, as there is no difference between civic national and ethnic Russian identities (Shabaev – Sadokhin, 2013). This phenomenon is manifested in what is called *obrusevaniye*, i.e. Russianization of the Maris.

9. Conclusion

This paper presented the analysis of the collective identity of the Mari on basis of Ehala's (2007, 2015) Sign Theory of Identity, which interprets identity as a social sign consisting of two aspects: signals (salience of features for identity) and meanings (emotional attachment to them). The strength between these components varies, producing changes of collective identity.

The present study found that Russian linguistic identity among the Mari has developed into an ethnic national identity via civic national identity, owing to the Russian language changing from a signal to a core value. This transformation is caused by strong emotional attachment of Maris to the Russian language. Thus, one can assume that modern Maris possess two identities: ethnic Mari and ethnic national Russian. The emergence of this ethnic national Russian identity among the Mari has also been caused by the absence of a clear distinction between civic national and ethnic national identities, indirectly facilitating an identity shift, which, according to Shabaev – Sadokhin (2013) is typical for the minorities in Russia. Language shifting among the Mari gradually erodes their ethnic identity, which manifests itself in their assimilation. Based on the findings of the present study, there are grounds to conclude that the general collective identity development of the Mari points to them becoming gradually „Russian”.

Undoubtedly, some of the conclusions regarding the collective identity of Mari can be considered universal in the Russian context, as similar processes are observed among other minorities (for, instance, development of Russian linguistic identity into ethnic national among Mordva and Komi, as exemplified by Sadokhin – Shabaev (2013). However, the set of properties characterizing collective identity is always special for any ethnic group being an invaluable source of theoretical and practical knowledge. Hopefully, the information about collective identity of Maris to some extent makes a contribution to this knowledge as well.

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The collective identity of the Mari

This article presents the results of an investigation into the collective identity of the Mari people in the Mari El Republic (the Russian Federation), based on the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala 2007, 2015) focusing on the phenomenon of the collective identity as a social sign. Parts of the Subjective vitality questionnaire and interview were used in collecting research data at fieldworks in 2013–2014 (Mari El, Russia). The analysis revealed that modern Maris have ethnic Mari and ethnic Russian national identities. The emergence of the Russian ethnic national identity is caused by a strengthening of a civic national identity due to the Russian language changing from a signal value to a core value. Absence of a clear distinction between these two identities, and a strong emotional attachment to the Russian language facilitate the process. A decrease in the use of the Mari language has an erosive effect on Mari ethnic identity. The results indicate that Mari collective identity is becoming gradually Russian-oriented.

Keywords: collective identity, core values, social sign, Mari language

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