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## Tatar Groups in Vkontakte: The Interplay between Ethnic and Virtual Identities on Social Networking Sites

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One of the Tatar groups in the popular Russian online social network Vkontakte.ru (<http://vkontakte.ru>) is called “*Skol’ko tatar Vkontakte?*” [‘How many Tatars are there in Vkontakte?’]. Nobody knows exactly how many users identify themselves as Tatars have registered in Vkontakte, and surely only some of them join Tatar groups. However, ethnically-based groups are being formed in cyberspace and are being joined by thousands of people, as the case of Tatar groups in Vkontakte.ru shows.

Recent research shows how Internet technologies facilitate new forms of interaction, transform social and language practices and impact identity formation and representation. The Internet not only facilitates interaction of dispersed groups of people with shared interests, but also creates a certain new version of reality. The term “cyberspace” was introduced to describe this new world of “virtual lands, with virtual lives and virtual societies, because these lives and societies do not exist with the same physical reality that ‘real’ societies do” (Jordan 2001, 1). While it is quite common to speak about “virtual reality” in contrast to real life, scholars have shown the relativity of sharp opposition between these two characteristics; thus, “The Internet is not growing apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it” (Agre qtd. in Wilson and Peterson 2002, 451).

The embeddedness of the “virtual world” of cyberspace in the real world is quite clearly demonstrated by proliferation of discourses of race and ethnicity on the Internet. Not only are numerous websites, forums, and newsletters focused on the issues of race and ethnicity, but also online Internet groups such as Yahoo! groups or groups in the social networks like Facebook or Vkontakte are being formed on the basis of ethnic, racial, and/or national belonging. As scholars underline, these “online groups exhibit a wide range of characteristics and serve variety of purposes, can be mobilized to further particular political agendas or to bring together dispersed members of familiar or ethnic groups” (Wilson 2002, 449).

This article focuses on one of the forms ethnicity takes on the Internet by presenting the case of the Tatar groups in Vkontakte. It aims to show how ethnic identity is being constructed, negotiated, and represented using the tools that the Internet provides, and how traditional visions of ethnic groups are being challenged and alternative versions are being articulated. Finally, it traces how Internet facilitates creation of new cultural identities with their locus in the cyberspace and which are embedded in the historical and cultural context.

While the Internet and ethnicity at first sight can seem to be opposing notions, in fact they have something fundamental in common: the element of virtuality. The concept of “virtual ethnicity” introduced by Poster expresses the interaction of real and virtual elements in the construction of ethnic groups, which goes beyond the traditional dichotomy “real-virtual” (Poster 1998). It underlines the virtual elements such as collective imaginary—in the form of myths and legends—as being constitutive of ethnicity itself (Zurawski 2000). The imaginary element in the constitution of nationhood and ethnicity was originally demonstrated by Benedict Anderson, who argued that such historically rooted communities as nations or ethnic groups were never face-to-face, but were “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2006, 6).

While print media was the main tool in the spread of nationalist consciousness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the age of new information and communication technologies, the Internet becomes another important space where nations or ethnic groups are being imagined and represented in a variety of ways. Similarly to how “race happens on Internet” (Nakamura 2002), nationhood or ethnicity can happen in a variety of virtual contexts such as online groups in Vkontakte. Members of an ethnic group or a nation who would probably otherwise never meet gather in one virtual space to discuss issues of common concern and share photos, music, and videos that in their understanding symbolize their imagined community. Therefore, the Internet emerges as a new discursive space where construction and mobilization of group identity is taking place. As scholars have underlined, “media forms like websites, discussion boards and chatrooms constitute new public spheres, or more accurately sphericules, smaller discursive spaces where group identities can be asserted, disseminated and rethought” (Parker and Song 2009, 588). On the individual level, collective identities operate by one’s self-identification through ethnic, national or racial categories. This process is taking place in virtual reality, too, as Nakamura notes, users are “electing to perform versions of themselves as raced and gendered beings” when they create characters to deploy in cyberspaces such as chats, online games, etc. (Nakamura 2002, 14).

While most contemporary mass media (print media, TV, radio) are state-controlled (in some countries to a greater degree than in others) and generally articulate only state-sanctioned and institutionalized versions of national or ethnic identity, the Internet is largely an uncontrolled, stateless space (though the state regulation of Internet is increasing in recent years in many countries, including Russia) where alternative versions and visions of the nation or ethnic group are represented, negotiated, and promoted.

Thus, in conceptualising national and ethnic identity we start from the point of constructed nature of these categories and follow the line of thought that underlines the “multiple and unfinished nature of identities, and their formation through relationships with antagonistic others, both real and imagined” (Parker and Song 2009, 589). Furthermore, Internet ethnic and national identities appear as even more unstable and fluid. As Zurawski has argued, transformation or translocation of the experiential world to cyberspace, can lead to the changes in the presentation and the interaction with ethnicity, which in its turn can lead to a changed awareness of one’s own as well as other ethnicities (Zurawski 2000). Thus, ethnicity can refer to identities in a dynamic state of diversity and hybridity, which are characterised by new and non-traditional differences and configurations (Leung 2005). This can be illus-

trated by some groups in Vkontakte, such as the group “*Cumans – Polovtsy – Kypchaklar...*” which represents ethno-cultural identities constructed in cyberspace as configurations of historic, mythological, and cultural elements, using modern digital technologies.

Another important aspect of the politics of identity on the Internet is the audience of the online spaces, i.e., the real people who, on the one hand, produce and, on the other hand, consume identity representations. The audiences of the social networks such as Vkontakte are mostly young people. The amount of information young people consume online and the degree of their involvement in the online activities (both quantitative and qualitative aspects), make such virtual worlds an important factor in the shaping of youth’s everyday lives and their identities.

### **Tatar Groups in Vkontakte: An Online Imagined Community**

The users of Vkontakte—a Russian social network that was modelled on the popular Western Facebook—are mostly young people. When joining Vkontakte they establish their own user profile, choose a user picture, post some information about themselves, add friends, and share music, photos, and videos. They can also organize interest-based groups and invite people to join them or become the members of already existing ones. Accepting an invitation to join a group Vkontakte is very easy; with a single click you become a member of an online community which provides you with a wide range of different resources. Any user can be a member of several different groups which range widely in their focus, starting from groups of school graduates to groups that are interested in politics or fashion. For ethnically-based groups, members gain an opportunity to meet their co-ethnics in other parts of the country or the world, to listen to ethnic music, or get recipes of national dishes.

The Tatars, the second largest ethnic group in the Russian Federation (after the Russians), according to the latest Russian census of 2002, number about 5.5 million people or 4 percent of the population of the Russian Federation. Tatars are linguistically, culturally, and religiously distinct from ethnic Russians. One of the main distinguishing characteristics is the language: Tatar belongs to the Kypchak group of Turkic language family. Another marker of difference is religion. Islam was adopted by ancestors of the Tatars, the Bulgars, in 922. The cultural and political centre of Tatars is the Republic of Tatarstan, a federal subject of the Russian Federation, situated in the Volga-Ural region. Tatarstan is regarded as the inheritor to the medieval states of the Volga Bulgaria and the Kazan Khanate. In 1552, the Kazan Khanate was conquered by the Russian tsar Ivan IV (known in the West as Ivan the Terrible) and incorporated into the Russian state. Before the Russian conquest, Tatars were predominantly in the sphere of influence of Islamic and Turkic civilizations. After incorporation into Russia, they lived as a religiously and ethnically cloistered community within the multiethnic Russian Empire. Their integration into the mainstream Russian society started rapidly in the Soviet Union when the autonomous Republic of Tatarstan was created by Soviet decree in 1920. In the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Soviet institutions replaced the traditional Tatar and Islamic systems of governance, including educational and religious institutions. While Tatarstan is regarded to be the centre of Tatar culture and political life, the majority of Tatars (about 70%) live outside of Tatarstan, especially in neighbouring republics

and oblasts of the Volga-Ural region, Siberia, and the historic capitals of Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a strong nationalist movement developed in Tatarstan, partially supported by the republican authorities who advocated the idea of the Tatarstan as a sovereign state (though still associated with the Russian Federation). As a result of power struggles between the republic and the federal centre, a treaty was signed between two subjects that granted Tatarstan a considerable degree of autonomy within Russia (Graney 2009). As many observers note, considerable support for the idea of autonomy or even independence of Tatarstan among elites, as well as the general population, is rooted in a long running Tatar nationalist movement. The beginnings of Tatar nationalism date back to the tsarist era, particularly the second half of the nineteenth century when such intellectuals as Shigabuddin Marjani developed the foundations of the national ideology of Tatars, based on the construction of a modern national identity for the Tatars based on language, Turkic ethnicity, and an origin myth (Schamiloglu 1990).

When analysing Tatar groups in Vkontakte, it is appropriate to view ethnic, national, and ethno-religious identities as interrelated concepts. The dominant language of the self-description of Tatars is the language of the nationhood. Despite the fact that Tatars do not possess an internationally-recognized state and from the point of view of international politics can hardly be defined as an independent country, public discussions about Tatars are dominated by the issues of nation-building, development of national culture, and national consciousness. While this can be partly attributed to the consequences of the Soviet nationality policies which have promoted the discourse of nationality in relation to many ethnic groups in the Soviet Union (Slezkine 1994), the historical symbols, narratives about the past, distinct cultural heritage, language, and religion, as well as rich intellectual traditions, have greatly contributed to the self-understanding of Tatars not only as a distinct ethnic group but as a nation with its own national ambitions.

The vision of the nation forwarded by Tatar nationalism is, however, not the one Anthony Smith would call the Western civic model. In contrast to the former type, where nation is defined through citizenship (i.e., belonging to a territorially bounded political community, which members have equal rights and duties), at the heart of the contemporary Tatar national ideology lies the “ethnic” concept of the nation with its emphasis on descent and myths about common origin (Smith 1991). At the same time, as Smith argues, every nationalism contains civic and ethnic elements, and for each type common myths, historical memories, and homeland (real or imagined) are fundamental to the construction of the national identity (Smith 1991).

Indeed, obsession over the ethnic underpinnings of the nation—though dominant in Tatarstan—does not monopolize the discussion. There is another discourse, promoted by the political leadership of the republic, about the Tatarstan nation defined as a civic multinational community of all people living in Tatarstan. This ideology strives to demonstrate that members of all ethnic groups are equally represented and supported by the Tatarstan government, thus, trying to receive loyalty and support for republican policies not only from Tatars but also from the rest of the population, in particularly Russians, who constitute almost half of the population (Graney 2009). This civic discourse about the nation of “*Tatarstantsy*” (roughly, ‘people of Tatarstan’) does not seem to advance far enough to become one of the

available options for self-identification of people in Tatarstan who still conceive of themselves in ethnic terms. If we talk about the Internet as one of the discursive spaces where national or ethnic identities are being constructed, articulated and reaffirmed, it is interesting to note that in Vkontakte there are no groups centred on Tatarstan that would be formed equally by Russians and Tatars or the republic's other nationalities. If a group has to do with Tatarstan, then, in most of the cases, it is a group centred around Tatar ethnic interests and is composed almost fully of Tatars. There are no such groups as "Russians of Tatarstan" or "Chuvash of Tatarstan."

There are other, albeit marginal, pan-Turkic and Bulgarist discourses about Tatar identity visible in the public sphere in Tatarstan as well. Pan-Turkic discourse emphasizes the common roots of all Turkic nations and the leading role of Tatars in the Turkic world. The Bulgarist ideologists reject the denomination "Tatar" for its historical association with barbarism and destruction, preferring instead the name "Bulgar." All these discourses are also articulated in cyberspace, and since Vkontakte is a social network comprised of young people, it is interesting to see how youths absorb and manipulate these discourses in cyberspace. Despite these multiple readings of Tatar ethno-national identity, there are certain core elements, what could be termed as symbols and myths, which are constitutive of the traditional, institutionalized, and popular image of the Tatar nation. These totems are also present in the Tatar groups in Vkontakte. The centrality of these elements is confirmed by the fact that alternative representations of national identity are being formed through challenging, debating, and negotiating these core elements.

Tatar groups in Vkontakte number from those composed of a few hundred to groups with thousands of members. I refer to them as to Tatar groups because they are predominantly concerned with topics related to Tatars and obviously the majority of their members are Tatars. These groups focus on specific issues and have different aims, which can be often reflected at times in their names (e.g., "*Tatary Rossii, ob'ediniates'! Rossia tatarlary – bergä buligiz!*" ['Tatars of Russia—Unite!']; "*Svobodnyi Tatarstan i natsional'noe soobshchestvo tatarskogo naroda*" ['Free Tatarstan and National Community of the Tatar People']; "*Nezavisimost' Tatarstana – Independence of Tataria*" ['Independence of Tatarstan']; "*Tatarstan yashläre*" ['Youth of Tatarstan']; etc.).<sup>1</sup> Many groups are organised to bring together Tatars from specific regions, cities, or villages (e.g., "*Tatary iz Samary – davajte znakomit'sja!*" ['Tatars of Samara – Let's Meet!']; "*Tatary i tatarochki Moskvyy*" ['Tatar Boys and Tatar Girls of Moscow']; "*Tatary i tatarochki Ul'janovska*" [Tatar Boys and Tatar Girls of Ul'ianovsk]; etc.).

The most populous Tatar group in Vkontakte has about 28,000 members (as of July 2009) and is called "*Vo mne tatarskaia krov*" ['I Have Tatar Blood']. It was organised in 2007 by young Tatars from Saint Petersburg; its members are mostly young Tatars or young people from mixed families where one parent is Tatar. The geographic dispersion of the group is quite wide with members from all over the country.

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<sup>1</sup> The URLs for these and all other Vkontakte groups are provided in the references.

**Figure 1.** Screen grab of the group “Vo mne tatarskaia krov” front page.

The screenshot shows the VKontakte interface for a group named '\*~\_ВО•МНЕ•ТАТАРСКАЯ•КРОВЬ\_~\*'. The top navigation bar includes 'Home', 'Groups', 'People', 'Market', 'Invite', 'Logout', and a search box. On the left, a sidebar lists user options like 'My Profile', 'My Friends', etc. The main content area is divided into sections: 'Information', 'Contacts', and 'ВСЕ О ТАТАРАХ'. The 'Information' section provides details about the group's name, type (Club), category (Associations - Clubs & Societies), and a description in Russian. The 'Contacts' section lists a website and city. The 'ВСЕ О ТАТАРАХ' section features four sub-topics: 'ТАТАРСКАЯ МУЗЫКА', 'ТАТАРСКИЙ ЯЗЫК', 'ТАТАРСКИЕ ЗНАКОМСТВА', and 'ТАТАРСКИЕ БЛЮДА'. On the right, there is a large image of a minaret, a 'Leave Group' button, and an 'Albums' section indicating 48 albums.

Source: <http://vkontakte.ru/club58998> (accessed 15 July 2009).

The name of the group “I have Tatar blood” already tells a lot about the character of Tatar ethno-national identity. Despite the fact that there are myriad cultural characteristics that distinguish Tatars from other peoples in Russia (principally language and religion), the belief that Tatarness is transmitted through the blood is pervasive and remains the most reliable and integrative ethnic marker. Many Tatars, especially those that live outside the Republic of Tatarstan, do not speak the Tatar language and do not practice Islam. Tatar names and Tatar parents are sometimes the only indicators of their Tatarness. Since Tatars are dispersed across a huge territory and such cultural elements as language and religion often cannot be markers of distinctiveness, a belief that Tatarness is transmitted through blood or genes becomes an important tool of integration and mobilization of ethnic group.

Another of the most numerous Tatar groups, “*Tatary i tatarochki*” [‘Tatar Boys and Tatar Girls’], has about 27,000 members. This group is specifically focused on dating and on meeting Tatar girls and Tatar boys with the ultimate prospect of marriage. In this group, another notion important for the ethnic identity is being mobilized: the desirability of a marriage with a co-ethnic. The majority of discussions in this group is concerned with meeting and marrying a Tatar, and topics such as “Why marry a Tatar,” “If one must marry—then only a Tatar,”

and “How Tatar girls differ from other girls” are being actively discussed. People use Vkontakte to find and connect to Tatars who hail from their home cities (in such discussions as “Are there Tatars from Samara here?” “Tatars of Orenburg”), etc. Image gallery contains albums with photos of “Tatar beauties” and “Handsome Tatar boys.”

Tatar groups Vkontakte have a clear networking function. By joining, Tatars from different regions of Russia get an opportunity to meet and establish connections with co-ethnics from other parts of the country and from their own city or region. Ethnic affiliation in this case becomes an important tool for building or widening networks and acquiring social capital. Vkontakte facilitates this process since the Internet makes communication easier and faster. The results of these online interactions in Tatar groups in offline contexts can be quite fruitful and are yet to be studied.

At the same time, there is another important aspect of the activity of these groups. Young people use them not only to meet other people but also to consume products of ethno-national culture (music, photos, and videos), and acquire and share information about Tatar history and culture, discuss issues related to Tatars, and the internal politics of Tatarstan. People find a certain ethno-national environment which may be lacking in their “real” offline contexts. Tatar groups can function as places where young people can practice or even learn Tatar language from their peers. To a certain degree, these groups become a locus of identity politics where certain representations of Tatar ethnic group are being created, circulated and consumed. These Tatar groups assemble symbolic resources (in the form of images, music, videos, texts) on which people draw when imagining their ethnic community. Thus, this participation influences the processes of identity construction of young people, accentuating their feelings of ethnic belonging.

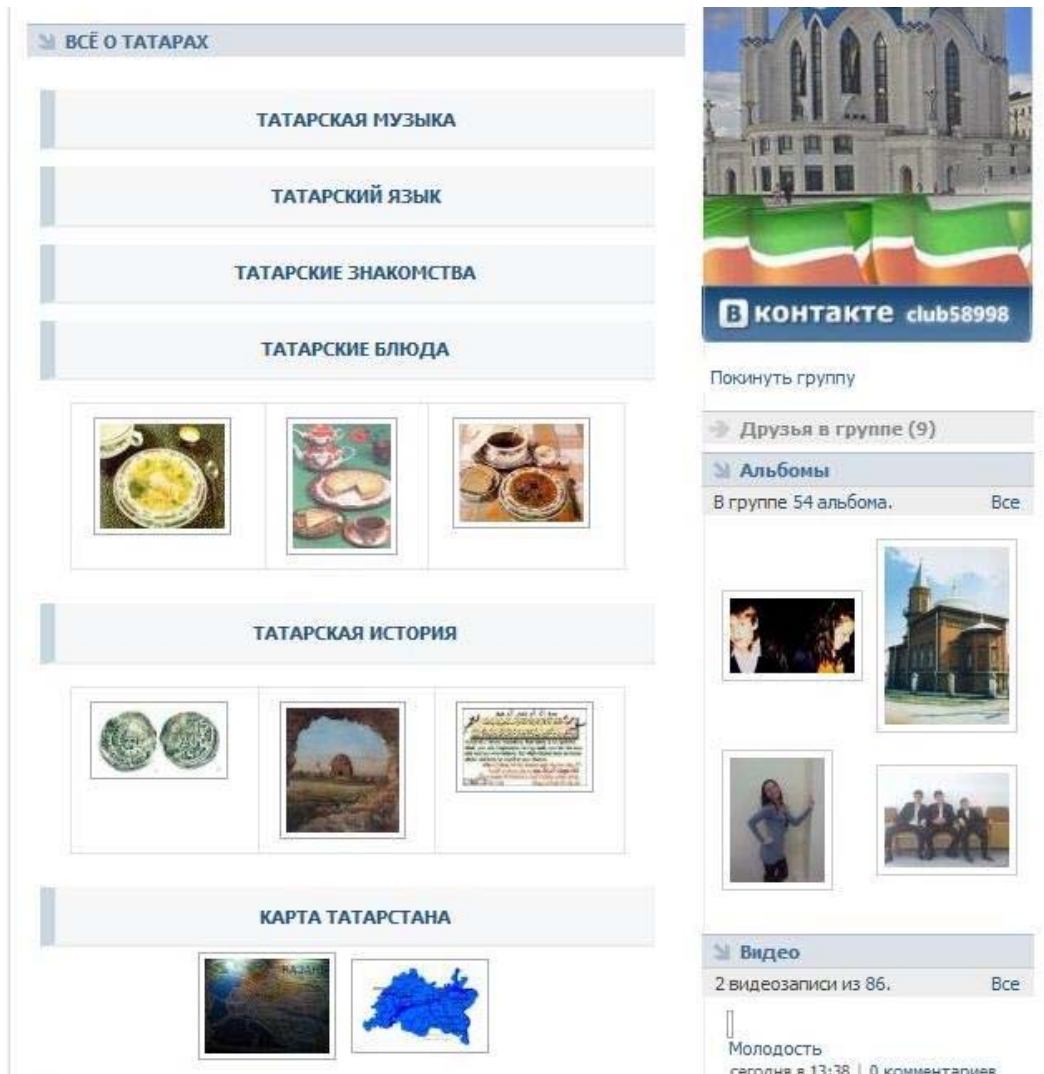
Besides providing space for communication and for sharing resources and information, these groups also allow for organising actions and mobilising people. Any member of the group can create an event, spread information, and invite people to take part in it. This way Vkontakte can facilitate organisation of “offline” meetings, political actions such as collecting signatures or other kinds of popular mobilisation.

Vkontakte allows the use of a wide range of different media and tools when creating a group. The first acquaintance with a group begins with a profile picture and a statement which describes the purpose of the group, gives background information as well as certain rules of behaviour (for example, not to offend the feelings of other ethnic groups or to avoid cursing or *mat*).

The welcome page of the group “*Vo mne tatarskaia krov*” [‘I Have Tatar Blood’] begins with a the thread “Everything about Tatars,” with sub-threads “Tatar Music,” “Tatar Language,” “Tatar History,” “Kazan,” “Tatarstan,” “Tatar Dishes,” and “Tatar Dating.”



**Figure 2.** Screen grab of the group’s “*Vo mne tatarskaia krov*” front page.



Source: <http://vkontakte.ru/club58998> (accessed 5 November 2009)

On the group’s wall, new members write greetings, ask questions, and post invitations to become friends. There is a special discussion board where users can start discussions on different topics. In the photo gallery, members create albums and post photos and images. In the group “I Have Tatar Blood,” a photo album titled “Everything about Us” contains images which in the minds of users symbolize Tatariness, starting from the logotype of Tatneft (an oil company located in Tatarstan) to national dishes to photos of famous Tatar actors, sports figures, and singers. These image galleries routinely contain photos of “Tatar landscapes,” “Tatar villages,” “Tatar faces,” etc. In the music and video gallery, Tatar music or videos are posted which can be played back online. Links to other Tatar web sites is given for those who are interested in particular issues.

Figure 3. Screen grab of the group “Tatary i tatarochki” front page.

**Свежие новости**

**Будьте добрее, и татары к вам потянутся!**

**Участникам обсуждений**  
Будьте корректнее, пожалуйста. писать без мата, без личных оскорблений. если вдруг кто-то будет "буянить" напишите мне в личку <http://vkontakte.ru/mail.php?act=write&to=18916> , всё уладим, обещаю.  
Дус торык!

**Обсуждения:**  
Показано 3 темы из 190. Новая тема | Все

**хочу замуж за ТАТАРИНА!!!!!!**  
1571 сообщение. Автор Аделинка Блондинка Мингулова, сегодня в 15:45 →

**Руско-татарская игра.**  
38 сообщений. Автор Диана Альбертовна Рахматуллина, сегодня в 15:20 →

**О наболевшем...)))**  
272 сообщения. Автор Ильдар Хаметов, сегодня в 15:01 →

**Фотографии** альбомы  
В основном альбоме группы 423 фотографии. Добавить | Все

**Аудиозаписи:**  
Показаны 3 аудиозаписи из 863. Все

	Ландыш Нигмэтжанова - Кон яктысы	3:27
	татарик - Про татарские глаза)	3:44
	Татарик и Ваню vs ГУФ (ЦЕНТР) - Мутные Замуты	1:23

**Участники**  
В группе 27 715 участников. ↓ Все

В группе 41 альбом. Все

**Видео**  
2 видеозаписи из 359. Все

Казан егетлэре -Эти китмэ  
27 окт в 20:35 | 1 комментарий

Телепередача "ИСЛАМ" - что такое Вера  
24 окт в 20:23 | 0 комментариев

**Руководство**

**Группы-друзья**

- ~ТАТАРСКИЕ СТУДЕНТЫ и ВЫПУСКНИКИ МОСКВЫ~  
Меркучелер
- Досуг татаро-башкирской молодёжи в Санкт-Петербурге!  
Питерские ТИТ
- \*Ислам.Татары .\*
- \*\*\*\*\*ТАТАРЫ НИЖЕГОРОДСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ\*\*\*\*\*
- Татарленд.ру
- ВМSTU татарları төркөме "ХӘРӘКӘТ"
- Землячество татар МГУ "МИРАС"  
mirasmsu.ru
- РТО и татары МПГУ

Source: <http://vkontakte.ru/club1777> (accessed 5 November 2009)

There are certain elements which can be seen as the key symbols used in the construction and representation of Tatarness across different Tatar groups in Vkontakte. Though members of Tatar groups live in different regions of Russia, the symbols of Tatarstan (flag and coat-of-

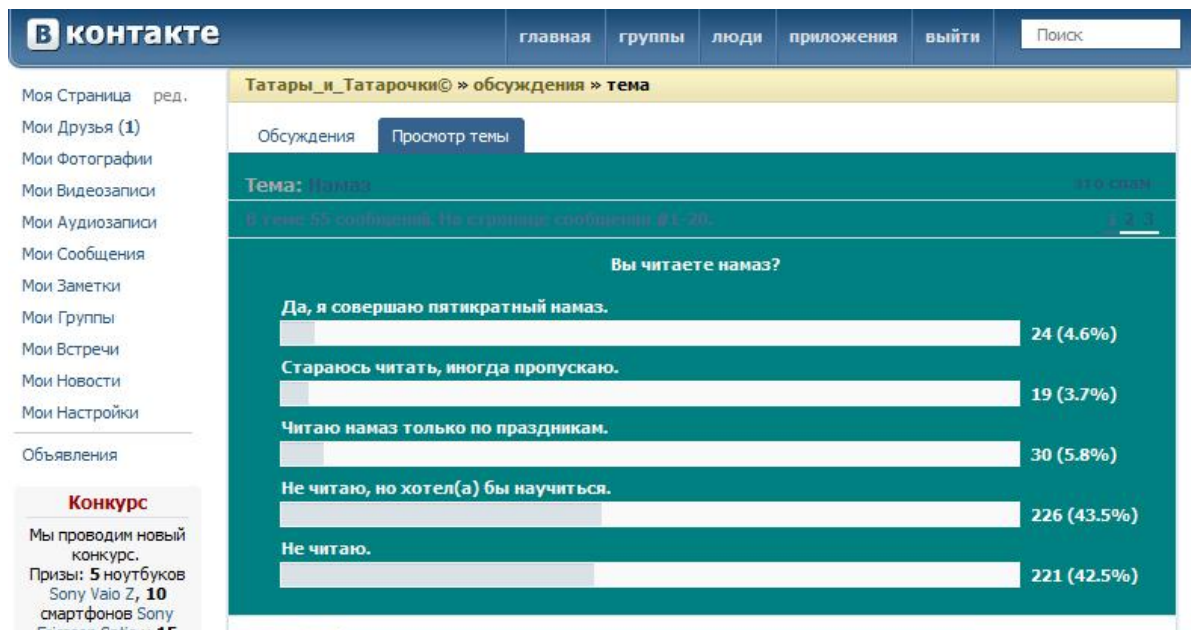
arms), music dedicated to Tatarstan, and discussions about the republic appear in a most of the Tatar groups. This reveals that Tatarstan is one of the most important symbols in imagining the Tatar community even though many of its members have never been there. Besides, there are Tatar groups that are explicitly centred on Tatarstan such as “*Nezavisimost’ Tatarstana – Independence of Tataria*,” a group that advocates independent and free Tatarstan or “*Natsional’no-osvoboditel’nyi front ‘Svobodnyi Tatarstan’*” [‘National Liberation Front ‘Free Tatarstan’]. The group “*Tatarlar! Dvizhenie za vozvraschenie tatar (bulgar) na istoricheskuiu rodinu v Tatarstan*” [‘Movement for the Return of the Tatar People to their Historic Motherland Tatarstan’] organised in February 2009, and has about 5,300 members who call Tatars to come back to their historic homeland Tatarstan. The aim of this group is to provoke substantial migration of Tatars from across Russia to Tatarstan, which would make Tatars an overwhelming majority in the republic. They believe this action will help preserve Tatar language and culture, will stimulate economic growth, and stop the assimilation processes that are “destroying the Tatar nation.”

Another important element in the construction of the Tatariness in these online groups is Islam. Muslim symbols (mosques, crescent moon, etc.) are frequently present in the design of the group, including the profile picture and special albums with Muslim images. Discussion topics frequently concern Islam, such as “Islam in Our Life,” “Islam and Modern Tatars,” “Greetings for All Muslims,” “Ideal Husband is a Muslim,” etc.<sup>2</sup> When users discuss topics concerning marriages, one of the arguments in favour of mono-ethnic Tatar marriages is religion. Voting is being organised on such issues as “Who Will Fast during Ramadan?” “Do You Pray Namaz?” Some groups contain special online instructions demonstrating how to conduct the Muslim prayer “Namaz.” Even though Islam is often present in symbolic form or even as the main focus of such groups as “*Musul’mane Tatarstana i Rossii*” [‘Muslims of Tatarstan and Russia’] and “*Islam. Tatory*” [‘Islam. Tatars’], it is difficult to assess the role Islam plays in the “offline” contexts of the Tatar youth. As discussions within Tatar groups in V Kontakte indicate, attitudes and degree of involvement with Islam among users vary greatly: some young people are practicing Muslims, while others perceive Islam more as a national symbol.

The reoccurring discussion topic within the Tatar groups in V Kontakte is assimilation (Russification) and the danger of Tatar nation’s disappearance. A concrete symbolic expression of that discourse is a figure of *mankurt*. This notion comes from Chingiz Aitmatov’s novel *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980), which tells the story of a *mankurt*—a young man who has forgotten who he is and where he comes from. In Tatar nationalist discourse, the *mankurt* is an assimilated, Russified Tatar who does not speak Tatar, does not respect his nation, and has lost his ethnic identity. An interesting discussion in the group “*Tatory Rossii, ob’ediniates’!*” [‘Tatars of Russia—Unite!’] lists 45 features of a *mankurt*, among which is the absence of knowledge of the Tatar language and reluctance to learn it. Discussions about how to preserve and develop the Tatar nation, about the future of Tatars, and about maintaining Tatar identity make the issue of the possible disappearance of the Tatar nation one of the main mobilizing themes in the construction of Tatariness.

<sup>2</sup> These topics are from the discussion board of the group “*Tatory i tatarochki*” at <http://vkontakte.ru/board1777#offset=50&order=0>.

**Figure 4.** Screen grab of the voting “Do you pray Namaz?” discussion board of the group “*Tatary i tatarochki.*”



Source: [http://vkontakte.ru/topic-1777\\_17579296](http://vkontakte.ru/topic-1777_17579296) (accessed 5 November 2009)

### Internet and Maintenance of the Minority Language

Language is one of the key elements in the construction and maintenance of the ethnic identity. It can be an ethnic marker identifying someone’s membership in a given group (Tabouret-Keller 1997), a vehicle for expressing a distinct culture, and an instrument for building political community (Safran 2004). The premier importance of language in nationalist and ethnic movements all over the world testifies to a close link between language, politics, and ethnic identity. Yet the relationship between language and ethno-national identity is a contested matter. There are many instances when for the reasons of practical adaptation—getting a job or gaining civic rights—an ethnic group adopts the language of the majority, even to the point of abandoning its own language (Safran 2004).

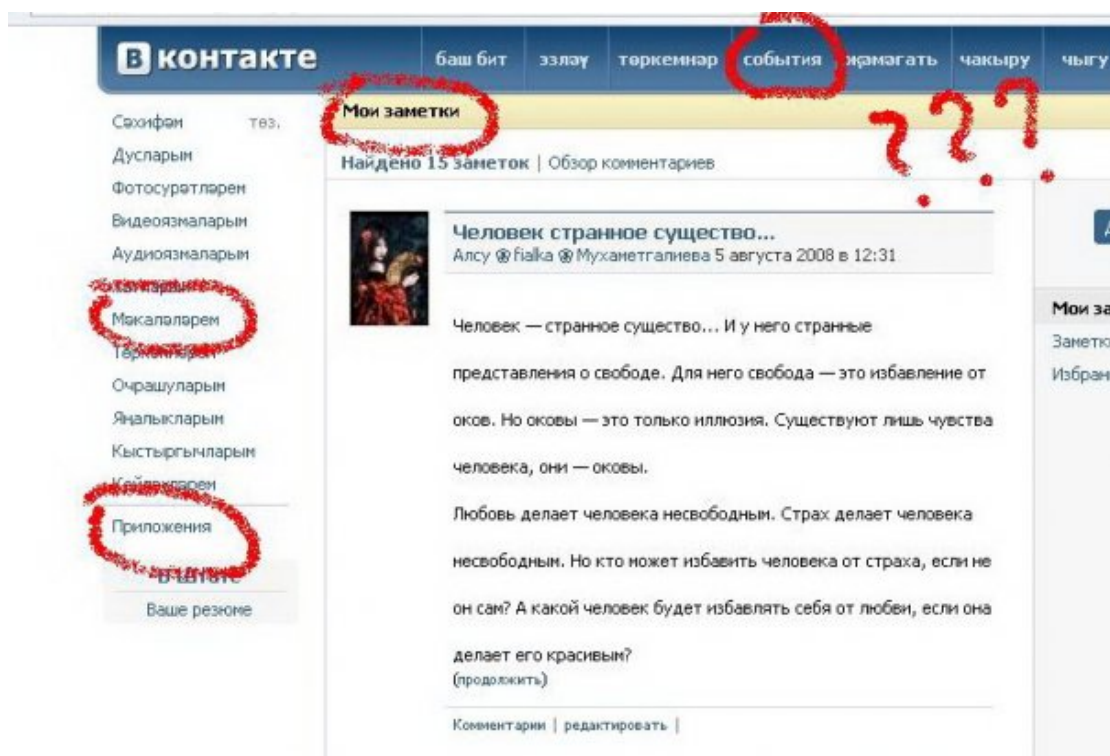
This is partly true for Tatars. In the Soviet Union, Russian was not only the language of interethnic communication, but the language of social mobility and an essential element of participating in Soviet society (Gorenburg 2006). Considerable numbers of Tatars (mostly in the urban areas) were socialized into the Russian language, grew up in a Russian-speaking environment, and received their education entirely in Russian. Thus, the Tatar language in Tatarstan is spoken by the minority of the republic’s population and cannot compete with Russian, which continues to play a dominant role in society. Still, a majority of the Russian-speaking Tatars identify the Tatar language as their mother tongue, even if only on a sym-



bolic level. This is evident from census data which collects data on mother tongue as well as other sociological surveys.<sup>3</sup>

As Eriksen has noted, despite globalization and vanishing of cultural differences in the contemporary world, recent decades have seen the widespread resurgence of ethnic sentiments and revitalization of local minority languages (Eriksen 1992). While modern era of mass communication, spread of the global culture and of the English language presents challenges for minority languages, the Internet offers the ways to empower them. Thus, spreading the use of the Tatar language in the Internet is one of the most important measures to preserve it. There are several websites that function only in Tatar or in Tatar along with Russian and English. Some Internet sites offer resources to learn Tatar language, such as online Tatar dictionaries or Tatar textbooks. The most vivid expressions of the integration of the Tatar language into the Web is Wikipedia in the Tatar language and Google's search engine for Tatar. Since 2008, the interface of Vkontakte is available in the Tatar language; however, its translation is still a work-in-progress. For those people that use the interface of Vkontakte in the Tatar language, a special group, “*Kontakt Tatar telendä. Vkontakte na tatarskom iazyke*” [‘Vkontakte in the Tatar Language’], was created where people get instructions how to switch the interface to Tatar language, discuss what words are better suited for certain Internet terms, or report errors or gaps in the translation.

**Figure 5.** Image from the photo gallery of the group “*Kontakt Tatar telendä. Vkontakte na tatarskom iazyke.*”



Source: <http://vkontakte.ru/club1834290> (accessed 5 July 2009)

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2002 census, 94.2 % of Tatars identified Tatar as their mother tongue.

Lack of fluency in the Tatar language is an issue for young Tatars as it is evident from the discussions in the Tatar groups of Vkontakte. Many group members are concerned with their scant knowledge of Tatar and express a wish to learn or practice it, asking help from other users. Some groups offer resources for learning Tatar and publish Russian-Tatar-Russian dictionaries on the group's page. For many young people, Tatar groups in Vkontakte represent a rare place where they can speak some Tatar with their peers. Thus, discussions, like "Guys, Let's Speak Tatar" come up quite often, and people complain about their limited knowledge, or the absence of opportunity to speak Tatar, or that speaking Tatar publicly is often condemned by others who do not understand it. This is particularly the case for Tatars from regions other than Tatarstan and Volga-Ural region in general. This reflects the fact that Tatar language is less preserved in the areas where Tatars represent numerical minority, do not have or have very few Tatar schools, and/or lack access to Tatar-language publications and broadcasts.

As discussions in these groups show, the symbolic capital of the Tatar language is closely linked to its value as a symbol of ethnic identity, and many are ashamed that they do not speak their mother tongue. Another aspect of its symbolic capital is a certain exclusivity, secrecy, and intimacy that speaking the Tatar language in a Russian linguistic environment provides.

Thus, Tatar groups in Vkontakte are multilingual spaces. People communicate in Tatar as well as in Russian, with some groups using the Tatar language to a larger degree. Furthermore, Vkontakte was used to organise several actions in support of the wider use of the Tatar language. One of such actions was to support and spread information about the campaign of collecting signatures to make Tatar the second official language of the Russian Federation that was run by some non-governmental organisations in Tatarstan ("*Tatarskii iazyk—iazzyk mira i materi*") ['Tatar Language—The Language of Peace and the Mother']. Another campaign aimed at promoting the use of the Tatar language offered users of Vkontakte to add to their profile pictures a special logotype "*Min tatarcha seläshäm*" ('I Speak Tatar'). An online event in Vkontakte, "*Min tatarcha seläshäm*," was launched to organise an offline meeting of young people in Kazan (the capital city of Tatarstan). Participants later went into the streets to teach some basics of Tatar to people they encountered.

### **Negotiations of Ethnic Identity and New Cultural Identities**

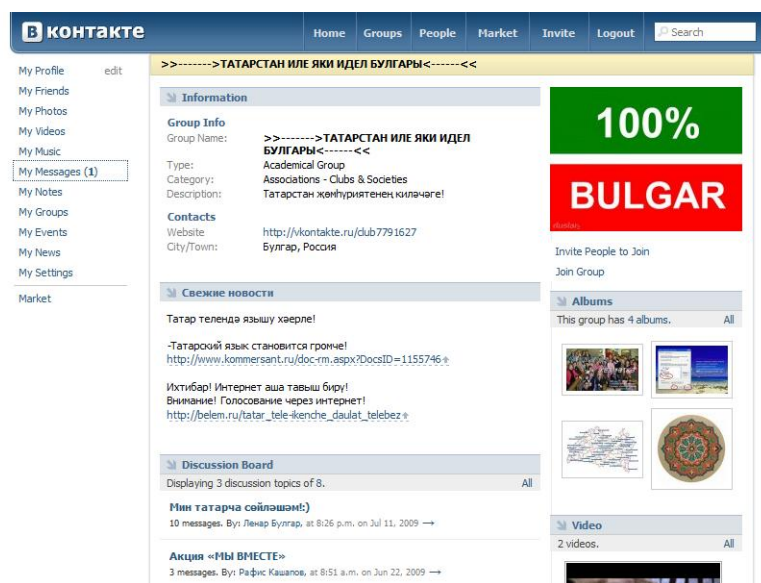
While at a first glance Tatar groups in Vkontakte seem to represent a quite clear and uncontested ethno-national identity, at a closer examination they reveal certain internal contradictions and contentions that show that ethnic identity construction cannot be complete and definite, but is always a dynamic and an open-ended process of negotiation.

As discussions in the aforementioned Tatar groups are revealing the given representation of Tatar identity with special vigour is contested from the side of those that prefer to be called Bulgars instead of Tatars. The issue of whether Tatars are actually Bulgars was raised by "Tatar" historians in the nineteenth century, but the strongest revival of this movement was in the 1990s when Bulgarist movement demanded that the ethnonym "Tatar" be changed to "Bulgar" based on claims of direct descend from the Bulgars of the tenth century (Rorlich

1999).<sup>4</sup> The members of this movement rejected Tatar identity on grounds that it was imposed by Russians and has pejorative connotations associated with a Tatar-Mongol invasion to Europe.

Young people who identify as Bulgars have organised themselves in V Kontakte and created several groups, the largest of which is called “*Bulgary*” [Bulgars] and numbered about 6,800 members in July 2009. While description of that group states clearly: “We are not Tatars – we are Bulgars,” the profile picture of that group is the coat-of-arms of the Republic of Tatarstan. At the same time, activists of that group are in favour of renaming “Tatarstan” into “*Bulgaria*” or “*Bulgar ile*” (‘The Country of Bulgars’). Information provided about the group states that “Tatar” is a name that was imposed from outside, that “Tatars” are Bulgars and by propagating the original name this group has the aim of “enlightening Bulgar souls.” It is further stated that the group was created to discuss the issues of Bulgar history, culture, music, literature, and art and to promote Bulgarism. When the name Tatar is used in this group it is always in quotation marks (the “Tatars”) or with the adding “the so-called.” Reinterpretation of ethnic identity implies reinterpretation of its symbols, thus Bulgars connect Bulgar language (the present “Tatar” language) not with a Cyrillic (which is used today) or Arabic (which was used traditionally) alphabet, but with a runic alphabet that, according to historians, was used by Turkic tribes in the early medieval times. At the same time, Bulgar identity is a pan-ethnic identity which goes beyond a single ethnic group (i.e., “Tatars”) and encompasses other modern ethnic groups including the Chuvash, Bashkirs, Kumyks, Bulgarian Bulgars, etc. A group in V Kontakte “*Bulgary mira – my vmeste!*” [‘Bulgars of the World—Let’s Be Together!’] aims to unite all the peoples whose ancestors were Bulgars.

**Figure 6.** Screen grab of the group’s “*Tatarstan yaki Idel Bulgary*” [‘Tatarstan or Volga Bulgaria’] front page.



Source: <http://vkontakte.ru/club1416754> (accessed 15 July)

<sup>4</sup> Bulgars were a union of Turkic-speaking tribes that established a first state on the territory of the Volga-Ural region known as the Volga Bulgaria which lasted from the ninth to the thirteenth century.

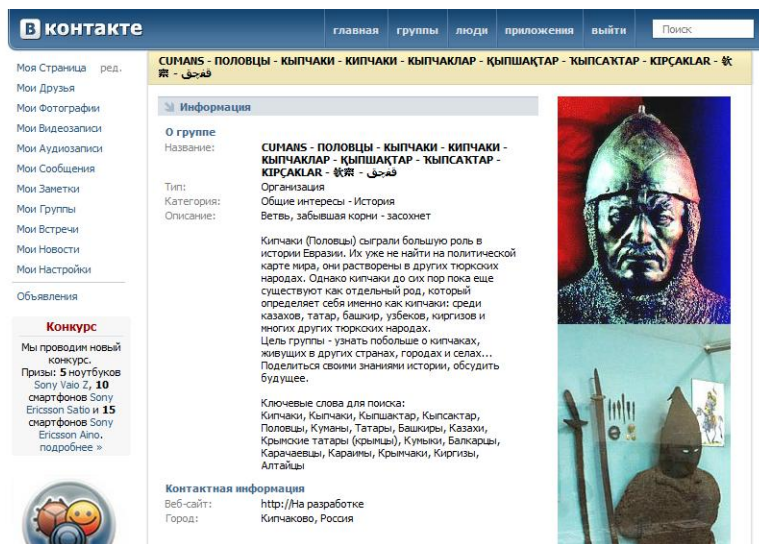
Indeed, the issue of what ethnonym to choose—Bulgar or Tatar—has become a serious political question in light of a forthcoming all-Russian census to be held in 2012. A new official list of nationalities for the census will probably include “Bulgar” as an officially recognized nationality. While the Bulgarists themselves claim that about 1 million people will register as Bulgars experts doubt strongly that this number will be significantly high. However, if joining the group “Bulgar” in Vkontakte prompts people to register as Bulgars in the forthcoming census, then some several thousands of Bulgars will appear on the ethnic map of Russia. At the same time, the Tatars will lose thousands.

Thus, the Bulgar groups in Vkontakte are examples of the efforts to contest and reinterpret an institutionalized version of ethno-national identity and to some extent to go beyond its narrow ethnic understanding. Another example are groups in Vkontakte created by Tatars and attracting many Tatar users that present themselves as communities which go beyond ethnic boundaries and are based on the common Turkic origin or on the belonging to a certain geographic and cultural area. One such example is the group “Tanbatyr,” which was created with the aim of uniting all Finno-Ugric, Mongolic, and Turkic peoples of the Volga-Ural region, to revive and practice their old beliefs, religions, and traditional ways of life. The ethnonym “Tatar” and ethno-national understanding of identity are replaced here by identifications such as “Turks.” The cultural symbols are the Turkic Runic alphabet and the religious belief of Tengriism which was common among many Turkic peoples, including the ancestors of Tatars, the Bulgars, before their conversion to Islam. In the discussions held in these groups Islam is regarded as an alien and late religion while Tengriism is the one true religion of Turkic people. Other groups that were formed to bring together Turkic people are “*Edinyi Turkskii narod*” [‘Unified Turkic Nation’], “*Tengrianstvo*” [‘Tengriism’], “*My – Turki*” [‘We are Turks’]. Such groups allow people from different ethnic backgrounds—Kazakhs, Tatars, Bashkirs, Kalmyks, and others—to establish connections with each other, share images, music and videos, and discuss different issues, such as development of a common Turkic language, thus nurturing certain cultural-linguistic understandings of identity that go beyond narrow ethnic belonging.

Another example of how historical knowledge about ancient tribes and peoples is used in the construction of new identities on the basis of an online social network Vkontakte is a group named “Kypchaki” (original name “*Cumans – Polovtsy – Kypchaki – Kipchaki – Kypchaklar – Kypsaktar – Kipcaklar - ?? - ?????*”). Among its members are not only Tatars (though the creators of these groups are mostly Tatars), but also Kazakhs, Bashkirs, and representatives of several other Turkic-speaking people. Historically, name “Kypchak” refers to the Turkic-speaking nomadic tribes (that gave name to the Kypchak group of Turkic language family) who, according to scholars, took part in the ethnogenesis of many Turkic people, including Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and others. The Kypchaks, who were a nomadic warrior people inhabiting a vast territory of Eurasian steppes in the mediaeval times, have left some archaeological remains and historical records. Historical information about the Kypchaks—including a digitised version of the *Codex Cumanicus* which was a collection of Kypchak’s customs as reconstructed by archaeologists—are posted in the group.



**Figure 7.** Screen grab of the group’s “*Cumans – Polovtsy – Kypchaki.*” front page.



Source: <http://vkontakte.ru/club1839575> (accessed 5 November 2009)

On the one hand, this group can be regarded as an association of people that have common interests in ancient history. On the other hand, their preoccupation with Kypchaks has certain implications for their self-understanding. Members of this group compare their own faces or faces of their relatives and friends to the reconstructed ones of Kypchaks. They study their own genealogies and family histories to find Kypchak ancestors and discuss the remnants of the Kypchak language in their own languages. Some people directly relate to themselves as Kypchaks or the offspring of Kypchak. Thus, this reconstruction of Kypchak culture plays a certain role in the process of construction of one’s own identity. To a certain extent this can be regarded as a virtual ethnogenesis: a process of construction of a new (or revival of an old) ethno-cultural identity with the help of the Internet.

## Conclusion

Vkontakte is a popular tool of social networking in Russia and, at the same time, it is a place of construction, representation, and negotiation of non-Russian ethnic, national, and cultural identities. When analysing Tatar groups in Vkontakte, it is possible to speak about their three main functions. These can be briefly defined as social network, as a tool for political action, and as a locus of identity politics. By joining online groups in Vkontakte, people not only meet other co-ethnics, but participate in imagined communities based on institutionalized ethno-national identities (i.e., “Tatar”) or “new” or reconstructed ones (e.g., “Bulgar,” “Kypchak,” etc.). This participation does influence construction of one’s identity and it can mobilise certain representations about one’s ethnic group as well as accentuate feelings of ethnic belonging. At the same time, most of the users participate in several groups, thus a member of the group “Bulgar” can be at the same time member of the group “I Have Tatar Blood,” “Vkontakte in the Tatar Language,” and “Unified Turkic Nation,” as well as of different non-

ethnic interest-groups. This multiplicity of affiliations shows that ethnic identity is not fixed, but is fluid and negotiable, and Vkontakte is a fruitful platform for these negotiations.

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