



Russia's nationalities policy and the country's Central Asian residents' identity-based activities

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Abstract

As applied to the Russian case, identity politics means first and foremost a state strategy that regulates the public expressions of ethnicity-based solidarity in a way that prevents them from being motivated by a sense of injustice. With regard to Russia's Central Asian residents, injustice lies in tacit racist treatment by officials, police officers, employers and landlords. The peculiarity of officially recognised Central Asian organisations operating on the basis of state nationalities policy institutions is that they contribute to maintaining the status quo. They do so through orchestrating cultural activities that reproduce stereotypical images of harmonious ethnic diversity in Russia, as well as by supervising labour migrants. However, there are members in these organisations who do manage to use the resources of Russia's rather idiosyncratic nationalities policy to fulfil their own aspirations, i.e. to practice identity politics for which the policy is not intended.

Keywords Nationalities policy · Ethnocentrism · Migrants from Central Asia · Identity-based mobilisation · Immigrant organisations

Introduction

The contemporary Russian state apparatus treats the idea of spontaneous social self-organisation with a deep distrust. This distrust applies to any grassroots manifestations of identity-based solidarity. Almost from its inception, the period of Putin's

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rule has been characterised by the state's desire to control the public agenda related to (multi-)ethnicity issues — the “nationalities question” in Russian official discourse.¹ Attempts to establish control include suppression of unauthorised minority movements (Yusupova 2018, 2022) and state institutions' efforts towards “harmonisation of interethnic relations” (Strategy for State Ethnic Policy 2014). Those efforts inherently avoid involving human rights defenders to develop joint solutions for the protection of minorities' rights. Rather, they function to report bureaucratically that the state is already effectively coping with the task.²

By allocating special platforms for identity-based public activities, such as Houses of Friendship of Peoples, Russia's authorities attempt to guide such activities in ways they consider to be proper. Houses of Friendship are state institutions found across Russia and designed to reflect ethnic diversity. They focus on holding regular cultural events in cooperation with officially recognised nationality-based public organisations.³ Encouraging the reproduction of stereotypical images of one or other nationality's culture, the authorities portray such organisations as personifying particular ethnic groups' respective interests.

Among such organisations are those that claim to present the interests of Russia's residents who hail from a particular Central Asian country. Persons of Central Asian descent face various forms of discrimination in Russia. Those include racist attitudes which they often experience in the housing and labour markets regardless of whether they are foreign nationals or Russian citizens. However, Central Asian labour migrants suffer the most precarious and vulnerable living and working conditions such as exploitation by employers, police abuse, and bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining legal status. But, since the state's nationalities policy aims to maintain the status quo, participation of Central Asian organisations in its implementation brings little chance to improve the situation. Cooperation of Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz public organisations with Russia's nationalities policy institutions is nonetheless of interest as it exposes the state's attempts to control public manifestations of migrants' identity whilst also revealing occasional ways that identity politics is

¹ “Nationality” (*natsional'nost'*) is a Russian equivalent of “ethnicity” understood exclusively in essentialist terms. This term originates from Soviet political and legal vocabularies and implies ethnic categorisation of Russia's population, and not identification of individuals in the context of international law. We refer below to the Russia's “Strategy for State Ethnic Policy”, where, in the English translation, the adjective “natsional'niy” (literally “national” but meaning a strategy towards multiple ethnicities in Russia) is translated as “ethnic.” We are aware that “nationality” has its own peculiar semantics in Russian political language. However, since even the Russian version of the “Strategy” often uses “nationality” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, we also follow that usage whilst recognising that this is a methodological simplification.

² The term “minorities” is almost never used in Russian bureaucratic language — ostensibly to avoid the subject of discrimination (Malakhov 2010). Formulations such as “strengthening of civic unity and patriotism” and “maintaining interethnic harmony” are more common (Shcherbak and Sych 2017).

³ As mentioned above, “nationality” here is understood primarily as belonging to a certain ethnic group within Russia's population. However, we refrain from translating the Russian adjective *natsional'niy* (which means belonging to a nationality) as “ethnic” in this particular case. We preferred such a way of translating for the following reason. When it comes to public organisations in question, “nationality” means rather an ethnic group in relation to Russia's minorities, and in relation to people from the post-Soviet states, rather their country of origin.

practised in the interests of members of those organisations. Given that the Russian legislation deprives foreign citizens of the right to organise political actions, and participation in protests against the infringement of labour rights in fact often turns into deportation for migrants, Russia's Central Asian residents have almost nothing left but to use those organisational opportunities that are sanctioned by the Russian state. This, of course, applies to the cases when they see the point in engaging in public activities. The question, however, is whether public activity carried out within such a strictly defined institutional framework can contribute to the acquisition of relative social justice.

This article is based on a field study conducted in four Russian cities: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara and Kazan. It aims to explain how Russia's nationalities policy limits identity-based mobilisation of the country's Central Asian residents whilst simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, providing small opportunities for such mobilisation to occur. We show how the activities carried out through nationalities policy institutions can be combined with other types of identitarian activism that goes beyond the goals pursued by Russia's authorities. However, we first discuss in detail the key presuppositions and objectives of the nationalities policy. We then outline the key changes in the socio-demographic parameters of migration to Russia from Central Asia over the last half century before considering how Central Asian public organisations have developed. This provides a backdrop to our analysis of how the nationalities policy affects identity-based mobilisations of Russia's Central Asian residents.

Russia's nationalities policy: presuppositions, objectives and institutions

Russia's nationalities policy can be considered at two interconnected levels — rhetorical and instrumental. Rhetorically, it manifests in statements by political leaders about their responsibility to maintain civic unity in the context of the country's ethnic diversity. Under Putin's rule, maintaining this unity has progressively meant increased control by law enforcement agencies over nationality issues (Edwin et al 2006; Bækken and Enstad 2020). Instrumentally, the policy embraces educational, language and cultural policy measures explicitly for “preservation of diversity” (Strategy for State Ethnic Policy 2014) — measures undertaken by federal and regional ministries and departments.

The rhetorical and instrumental dimensions interconnect so that the state discourse on nationalities frames social issues as interactions between different ethnic groups, each conceived as a taken for granted entity. It thereby oversimplifies such complex phenomena as the relationship between the federal centre and the regions, migration, multilingualism and education. By resorting to such a perspective, the state endows itself with the role of an arbiter capable of regulating these interactions optimally. Vladimir Malakhov, characterising this epistemological setting as “methodological ethnocentrism”, traces its origins to the essentialist knowledge inherent

in Soviet anthropological science (2010: 72–73).⁴ The nationalities policy is not so much a separate sphere of governmental activity (as it could be, for instance, were it defined in terms of anti-discrimination measures) as a way of dealing with various social issues through the prism of methodological ethnocentrism.

Since the Russian leadership's nationalities policy statements emphasise that "unity in diversity" should be maintained through dialogue between the state and civil society associations (*obshchestvennie ob'edineniia*),⁵ institutions such as Houses of Friendship of Peoples (and similar establishments⁶) are designed to cope with this task. The role of Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik nationality-based public organisations in these institutions is, however, peculiar due to their ambivalent positioning towards the state's Central Asian residents. On the one hand, exoticised and folklorised stage performances create images of ethnic Others, but those who, along with other nationalities, belong to the symbolic domain of Russia's diversity. On the other hand, local authorities entrust those same organisations to instruct migrants on how to "integrate" properly into Russian society. Leaving aside whether such an ethnocentric top-down approach to communication is viable, Russian officials' perception of migrants as frightening outsiders is striking. Since the Russian state apparatus is inclined to associate migrants with self-contained communities, appropriate intermediaries are required for interaction with them. Before discussing how Central Asian organisations acquired the role of intermediary, we must first consider the key transformations that migration from Central Asia to Russia has undergone over the past 50 years.

Changes in migration from Central Asia to Russia over the past half century

During the late Soviet period, migration from Central Asia to the then Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was quite limited when compared with that during the past two decades. According to Soviet censuses, the number of people who identified themselves (or were identified) as Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Kazakh among RSFSR residents was 583,000 in 1970 and 883,000 in 1989 (*Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1970, 1989a*). By comparison, the total Central Asian population resident in Russia in 2013, as defined in ethnic terms, was 4.5 million: 4 million of them were citizens of their respective countries of origin whilst

⁴ According to Malakhov, methodological ethnocentrism stems from Stalin's primordial definition of "nationality," which was later developed into the "ethnos" theory and became mainstream in late Soviet anthropological science (2010: 72).

⁵ This was stated in one of Vladimir Putin's articles written on the eve of the 2012 elections (2012).

⁶ In some Russia's regions, similar establishments are called Houses of Nationalities. Also, Houses of Friendship cooperate with other state funded cultural institutions located in the same city and/or region, such as libraries and Houses of Culture. The latter were inherited from the Soviet period. Thus, artistic groups performing under the auspices of a particular nationality-based public organisation have an opportunity to perform at different venues.

half million had obtained Russian citizenship after the USSR's dissolution (Abashin 2014: 12, 23).

During the Soviet period, such migrants able to settle in major cities of Russia were Communist party functionaries, the intellectual elite and those students admitted to institutes of higher education against limited quotas. Traders' and manual workers' long-term stay in such cities as Moscow and Leningrad was limited by strict rules for registration at a place of residence.⁷

After the Soviet Union's dissolution, mainly those perceived as not belonging to a state-forming ethnic majority (*titul'naiia natsional'nost'*, titular nationality) in the newly independent Central Asian republics were inclined to move to Russia.⁸ The exception was those who fled the 1992–1997 civil war in Tajikistan. The immigration wave of the 1990s was primarily politically induced with much assuming family resettlement in Russia and subsequent acquisition of Russian citizenship. Statistical data collected between 1993 and 2000 show that among those who migrated to Russia for permanent residence were only 32,000 Tajiks, 22,000 Uzbeks, 18,000 Kazakhs, 2300 Turkmens and 1800 Kyrgyz (Vishnevsky 2006: 322; Ivakhnyuk 2009: 31). During the 1990s, no population census was conducted in Russia, but according to the 2002 census, there were about 962,000 Central Asians residing in the country (Vserossiiskaia perepis' naseleniia 2002).

Since the early 2000s, the situation has changed dramatically. Against a backdrop of rising prices for Russian oil exports and shortages in many sectors of the Russian labour market (primarily construction, trade, communal services and housing), migration to Russia from Central Asia has changed demographically. It involved young males from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan⁹ “with a secondary education and a poor command of the Russian language, originating from the rural areas or small towns of Central Asia where unemployment rates remain exceptionally high” (Urinboev 2021: 28). According to official figures, some 2.3 to 3 million temporary labour migrants from these three countries have resided in Russia each year over the last decade (Florinskaya and Mkrtychyan 2021).¹⁰ In contrast to the late Soviet period, most are resident in Russia's most economically significant cities.

⁷ According to the 1989 census, the total number of Central Asians residing in Moscow and Leningrad was slightly less than 41,000 (Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1989b), which indicates the difficulty in acquiring registration in the largest cities of Russia at that time (Malakhov 2019: 319).

⁸ That is, those residents of Central Asian countries who identified themselves as Russians, Tatars, Chechens, and Ingush (Abashin 2014: 9).

⁹ Males constitute 80 and 90% of labour migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan but only half of those from Kyrgyzstan (Urinboev 2021: 28). Some scholars tend to explain the peculiarity of Kyrgyzstan in this regard by the fact that there is “a less patriarchal social structure” in this country when compared to the other two, which affects more favourable attitudes towards female migration (Ibid.: 22, see also Varshaver and Rocheva 2017: 99).

¹⁰ The vast majority (more than 90%) of temporary labour migrants come to Russia from post-Soviet countries. About two-thirds are from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Relatively few labour migrants come from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan although student migration from those countries to Russia is the largest of those from Central Asia. In 2020, there were about 50,000 student migrants from Kazakhstan, 35,000 each from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, 19,000 from Tajikistan and 8000 from Kyrgyzstan (Nechaev et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the demographic structure of the migration influx from Central Asia to Russia has become more complex in recent years, with its gradual feminisation and greater flexibility in migrant workers' employment trajectories (Varshaver and Rocheva 2017). However, most such migrants tend not to make long-term plans for settling down in Russia. Instead, they maintain a transnational way of living that involves oscillating migration between their country of origin and Russia which they perceive primarily as providing opportunities to sustain their households in the former (Abashin 2019). This attitude is not least caused by their experiences of structural discrimination manifesting in tacit racist treatment by employers, officials, police officers and landlords (Malakhov 2019: 314).

Central Asian organisations: functioning between culture and security

The phenomenon of nationality-based public organisations in Russia originated in the late 1980s *glasnost* period when they were allowed to register at citywide and regional levels (Sahadeo 2019: 180–181). By virtue of their charters, these organisations focused on holding cultural events ostensibly designed to maintain a sense of common identity amongst their members. However, leaders of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik organisations did not share that obsession with culture.¹¹ Most were relatively privileged persons who had remained in Russia after receiving higher education there. Their motivation to register a nationality-based public organisation was to legitimate their long-term interactions with city administrations. They themselves explained it providing a chance to alleviate some everyday hardships experienced by their newly arrived relatives and acquaintances who, after the USSR's dissolution, were treated as foreign nationals and thus faced problems accessing accommodation.¹²

During the 1990s and 2000s, the Russian state began using Houses of Friendship established in several regions¹³ as the main institutional platforms for interaction with nationality-based public organisations which consequently routinised and bureaucratised their activities. Since most of these institutions were subordinate to regional and city ministries of culture, they had to focus on staged performances of reified ethnicities. Many leaders of Central Asian organisations were, however, unenthusiastic about arranging such events which required them to invest their own funds to rent folk clothes, pay artists' fees or call for volunteers, etc. However, those who sought to receive patronage from local administrations (not least to secure their

¹¹ Turkmen and Kazakh organisations were not included in our sample as we focused on Russia's residents from three main countries of labour migrants' origin.

¹² During interviews with Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek organisation leaders, they often mentioned having begun, after 1991, to receive requests for support from fellow countrymen — requests to process documents, to assist in finding employment, to ensure workplace safety and to repatriate bodies of dead compatriots.

¹³ In 1995 in Bashkortostan, 1999 in Tatarstan, 2001 in Samara, 2003 in Moscow and 2005 in St. Petersburg.

own business ventures) tried at least to pretend to be actively involved in Houses of Friendship agenda.

The early 2010s saw a switch in the Russian authorities' rhetoric towards tighter control over "interethnic relations" in general and migrant integration in particular. This affected Houses of Friendship activities as law enforcement agencies used them to address nationality-based organisations and required leaders of the Central Asian organisations to surveil labour migrants whom police and security service departments considered a source of constant criminal threat (Berg-Nordlie and Tkach 2016).

However, most of these leaders' social circles predominantly involve people who, like them, had been living in Russia for a long time and hold Russian citizenship. Not only are they distant from the labour migrants' everyday lives; but also, as shown by various surveys,¹⁴ the majority of labour migrants do not consider nationality-based public organisations' leaders' claims to represent their interests as legitimate, and many are unaware of their existence. Nonetheless, the leaders try to appear to be able to coordinate a network of informal migrant communities.¹⁵ When incidents involving migrants and which the city authorities regard as "interethnic tensions" (ranging from simple street fights to exceptionally rare cases of collective protest), these leaders inevitably use social media to address their "compatriots," and urge them to keep a low profile and not participate in street actions.

Leaders of the Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz organisations are commonly small business entrepreneurs although some are academic workers and court interpreters. To perform their cultural and communicative functions, they rely on various others — Russian citizens of Central Asian descent and migrants — whose aspirations may vary. The composition of such organisations' most active members (usually 5 to 15 people) depends on the organisation's areas of activity. These may include support for dance and music ensembles, communication with labour migrants, education, youth policy and sports, with one member responsible for each albeit often with several assistants. Cultural activities are performed by those with an artistic education but whose professional employment is unrelated to art. They lead dance and musical ensembles that perform for free at Houses of Friendship and city festivals celebrating ethnic diversity. Those who have experienced social downgrading in Russia through being employed in positions below their educational level organise educational clubs for migrants' children whilst the organisations' youth policy works to attract students to support the organisation's activities voluntarily. We now consider several illustrative cases of how organisations' members' aspirations might be fulfilled in order to identify the main types of identity-based mobilisation to which their activities contribute.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Bryazgina et al. 2019.

¹⁵ Formed either according to the criterion of a common place of work in Russia or belonging to the same locality in the country of origin. Coordination between them, when it really takes place, has been carried out in recent years through social media.

Identity-based mobilisations carried out through Central Asian organisations

1. Organisation heads: responding to requests for state-driven identity mobilisation in Russia whilst accumulating transnational capital

Russia's nationalities policy institutions' cultural agenda is to create an idyllic representation of peace and harmony in interethnic relations — visually captured by a circle of folkloric characters holding hands, each personifying a certain nationality. This Soviet-era ideological cliché that “we are different, but united” is still depicted on *Druzhiba narodov* (Friendship of People) posters and is used, along with the Houses of Friendship of Peoples, to establish the Russian state as the “unifier.” However, whilst the Soviet idea of unity was affirmed through striving for a common socialist future, the current Russian leadership refers to the common past as illustrated by two main events in the Houses of Friendship's annual schedule: Unity Day and Victory Day celebrations respectively on November 4 and May 9 and for which nationality-based organisations including those of Central Asians mobilise participants.

Unity Day was introduced in 2005 to replace the Soviet 1917 October Revolution holiday, previously celebrated on November 7. The new holiday was artificially tied to Moscow's early seventeenth century liberation from Polish invaders. Notably, many Russian ultra-nationalists perceived this innovation as legitimatising their supremacy, and, in the second half of the 2000s and early 2010s, Central Asian migrants were often beaten up on this day in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In that context, Unity Day concerts symbolising “peace and harmony” look like something from a parallel universe.

Victory Day (celebrating Russia's Second World War¹⁶ victory) sees leaders of Central Asian organisations mobilising their wards to participate in various city actions. Those include the “Immortal Regiment” street procession during which participants carry portraits of relatives who died in that war and in Houses of Friendship, students, invited by the Central Asian organisations' leaders, being given portraits of famous war heroes. Moreover, students are given folk clothes from their respective countries of origin which are supposed to make their presence in the action visible. Through such a bizarre combination of traditional and Soviet symbols, the organisers of the action are trying to demonstrate the contribution of various Soviet republics to the common victory. Nonetheless, any attempt by students to unfurl their motherland flags are thwarted by the nationality-based organisations' leaders, thus indicating that any identity manifestations the Russian state welcomes should not question loyalty to Russia.

In exchange for mobilising people to participate in events important to the institutions of national policy, leaders of Central Asian organisations gain favours from Russian officials in order to promote their private business interests.¹⁷ This,

¹⁶ Commonly called the Great Patriotic War in Russia.

¹⁷ Not all leaders are so motivated. Some participate in House of Friendship activities simply because they consider doing it right and worthy.

in turn, enhances their symbolic status in the eyes of the authorities of their countries of origin and provides them opportunities to perform as intermediaries in the transnational migration infrastructure. They do that through cooperating with sending countries' ministries of labour and their recruitment campaigns for enterprises in Russia, a task for which they receive a share of revenue generated.

Given the extent of political competition in Kyrgyzstan, political parties there seek the help of the leaders of Kyrgyz organisations in Russia to gain migrants' support. Moreover, in some Russian cities lacking a Kyrgyzstan consulate, the leaders of nationality-based organisations are authorised, by Kyrgyz authorities, to arrange polling stations for migrants during elections.

What the above shows is that leaders of Central Asian organisations in Russia are able to convert the maintenance of the status quo in Russian nationalities policy into transnational social, economic and political capital.

2. Enthusiasts: engaging with the politics of identity for cultural purposes

In contrast to the leaders of nationality-based organisations, those enthusiasts who run artistic groups (dance and music ensembles) tend to engage with Russia's nationalities policy for cultural pursuits. An example is one of our female informants who, having made efforts to create a youth club at a House of Friendship, but that were stymied by the local Kyrgyz organisation head, decided to support the leader of another multi-regional Kyrgyz organisation, who had been nominated in the primaries for the main pro-Putin party, "United Russia." She hoped thereby to gain administrative support and to obtain permanent premises for her cultural club.

Many cultural enthusiasts and students perceive cooperation with a nationality-based organisation as a chance to obtain symbolic and material resources to promote their own cultural projects. Thus, the founder of one Kyrgyz cultural club said that her efforts, when holding folk songs contests, to divide participants into teams according to their home region in Kyrgyzstan, had led to organisations based on local identity — rather than just nationality — subsequently appearing in Moscow.

Other enthusiasts say that culture allows one to rise above parochialism, to overcome what they call widespread "tribalism" amongst Central Asian migrant communities. Thus, they comprehend their cultural mission not so much as a representation of an already existing national identity, as understood by the ethnocentric cognitive framework of Russia's nationalities policy, but as something needing to be newly created in the context of migration. The case that follows exemplifies.

3. Pamiri Sunday music club: an "undercover" identity-based mobilisation

The case of a Pamiri Sunday school, operating under the aegis of an officially recognised Tajik organisation, illustrates how cultural activities may construct a local-regional identity. Pamiris in this context refers to those who claim to originate from an autonomous Tajikistan region in the Pamir Mountains. People living there speak various Iranian-group languages but share a common identity constituted by their support for the spiritual leader of the world Ismaili community, Aga Khan. In Russia, such support is provided through Pamiri public organisations in a few large cities, although not where this particular Pamiri Sunday school operates.

Whilst the head of that Tajik organisation refuses to acknowledge publicly that there is a separate Pamiri group amongst its supporters, the mentor of the only children's musical ensemble performing under the auspices of this organisation instils a Pamiri identity in her wards. She is able to do that because the organisation's leadership needs to perform cultural events of the local House of Friendship and so turn a blind eye. The mentor also gives children from Pamiri families regular Sunday classes at the organisation's House of Friendship office and there teaches them the basics of Ismaili ethics. She permits her pupils to communicate amongst themselves in Russian since, she says, this does not contradict the idea of their common Ismaili Pamiri identity because Pamiri linguistic diversity allows either Tajik or Russian as a *lingua franca*. This example illustrates construction of a local regional identity mobilisation within the framework of a nationality-based organisation.

4. Kyrgyz Sunday school mentor: homeland-oriented political activism and patriotic education

Similar Kyrgyz Sunday school mentors are often involved in homeland-oriented political activism. In one Russian city, the woman running the Sunday school taught Kyrgyz migrants' children the Kyrgyz language since she feared they might stop speaking Kyrgyz and assimilate. She had, during the 2010s, mobilised supporters of Sadyr Japarov in Russia and participated in a campaign for his release — he was then a political prisoner and subsequently became president of Kyrgyzstan. Although having lived in Russia for about 20 years and a Russian citizen, she nonetheless considered herself a Kyrgyzstan patriot with a civic responsibility for the country's future — a sense of responsibility that led to her hoping that her pupils repatriate to Kyrgyzstan as adults.

What the above shows is that the practice of multifold activities by participants in Central Asian organisations in Russia enables their effective functions to include more than the maintenance of the status quo as per Russia's nationalities policy. Others such functions include transnational mobilisation which has the potential to produce political changes in migrants' countries of origin, as well to enable identities to manifest that do not fit into the homogenised ideas about "nationalities" and which Houses of Friendship are intended, by the nationalities policy, to endorse, authenticate and confirm.

Conclusion

A consequence of Russia's nationalities policy is that identity politics means first and foremost the Russian state apparatus's anxiety about spontaneous manifestations of ethnicity-based solidarity. This is exacerbated by Russian officials' inclination to discern many complex social issues in terms of one-dimensional "interethnic relations" to a point where they subject such relations to state regulation. Russia's nationalities policy is thus implemented through such institutions as Houses of Friendship that bureaucratically routinise identitarian activities through cooperation between local authorities and nationality-based organisations. The latter mobilise participants for state-authorised

celebrations of diversity, thereby reifying ethnic cultures and acting as gatekeepers for those enthusiasts who see the only opportunity to be engaged in public identity-based activities through Houses of Friendship.

In this context, Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz organisations are peculiar in that, in addition to orchestrating cultural activities, they are expected also to supervise labour migrants whom law enforcement agencies perceive as a source of constant threat. However, their ability to influence migrant audiences is quite limited, and their leaders have to pretend that they are able to be a connecting link between Russian authorities and migrants. Nonetheless, since the authorities give these leaders the role of personifying an “ethnic group”, the multiple ways that Russia's Central Asian residents identify themselves are inevitably reduced to stereotypes. As one informant, a student volunteer with a Tajik organisation, noted: “at some point I realised that we were trying to change the public image of a ‘bad migrant’ into a good ‘folk character,’ but in fact it was all about simplification of reality.”

That said, since the activities of the Houses of Friendship are largely predetermined by a bureaucratic logic requiring reporting formally about their activities, members of Central Asian organisations get room to manoeuvre. This includes not only leaders who agree to perform the Russian authorities' prescribed rituals — often for their own private benefit — but also those enthusiasts who use the resources of nationalities policy institutions to fulfil their own aspirations. These aspirations include identity-based activities which do not match with the rigid “nationality” framework. Certainly, when it comes to the most significant events like Victory Day, the limits of what is acceptable become clearly visible, as exemplified by the ban on unfurling national flags. However, without openly violating the imposed rules of the game, members of Central Asian organisations do manage to use Russia's rather idiosyncratic nationalities policy to practice identity politics that enable them work towards goals for which the policy is not intended — goals that offer the potential for them to achieve a small degree of social justice in an otherwise highly constrained context.

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Declarations

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