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Discussion of the Directions of Territorial Identity Policy by Residents of the Perm Agglomeration in the Social Network "Vkontakte" Online Communities

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Abstract

The article examines the features of public discussion of the territorial identity policy of one of the Russian urban agglomerations in social networks. The article contributes to filling the gap in scientific knowledge on the perception and assessment of the territorial identity policy by the population of Russian urban agglomerations. The first empirical study of agglomeration identity issues based on social media materials is presented using the example of the Perm agglomeration. The article presents the results of an analysis of the discussion of the directions, intensity, nature, and tone of events and projects related to the territorial identity policy pursued in the Perm agglomeration, carried out using Big Data technology and machine learning. The posts and comments in 25 VK groups initiated by residents of the settlements included in the Perm agglomeration themselves were studied for the period from the beginning of 2023 to the end of April 2024. The communities selected were carried out taking into account the significant number of subscribers, the high frequency of publication of posts and comments, the wide range of issues raised related to the place of residence of people.

Keywords

Identity; Territorial Identity Policy; Perm Agglomeration; Online Communities; VKontakte Social Network; Identity of Agglomerations

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Обсуждение направлений политики территориальной идентичности в онлайн-сообществах «ВКонтакте» жителями Пермской агломерации

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Аннотация

Статья направлена на рассмотрение особенностей публичного обсуждения политики территориальной идентичности одной из российских городских агломераций в социальных сетях. Представлено первое в науке эмпирическое исследование вопросов агломерационной идентичности на основе материалов социальных сетей на примере Пермской агломерации. В статье представлены результаты выполненного с помощью технологии Big Data на основе машинного обучения анализа обсуждения направлений, интенсивности, характера, тональности мероприятий и проектов, связанных в проводимой в Пермской агломерации политики территориальной идентичности. Изучены посты и комментарии в 25 группах «ВК», инициированных самими жителями входящих в Пермскую агломерацию населенных пунктов, за период с начала 2023 г. до конца апреля 2024 г. Отбор групп проводился с учетом значительного числа подписчиков, высокой частотой публикаций постов и комментариев, широкой тематикой поднимаемых вопросов, связанных с местом проживания людей. На примере Пермской агломерации установлено, что у жителей агломерации вызывают наибольший интерес такие вопросы политики территориальной идентичности, как наименования различных географических объектов в месте проживания, памятные дни и праздничные даты, культурные события, а также связанные с краеведением курсы в средних, средних профессиональных и специальных образовательных учреждениях.

Ключевые слова

идентичность; политика территориальной идентичности; Пермская агломерация; онлайн-сообщества; социальная сеть «ВКонтакте»; идентичность агломераций

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Introduction

The study of identity politics in Russian agglomerations is at its early stage. The issue of perception and assessment of the identity policy by the population of Russian urban agglomerations is one of the issues for which there is an obvious deficit of knowledge. There are still no publications that would reveal the discussions in social networks of the identity policy in agglomerations. This article is intended to contribute to filling this information gap using the example of the Perm agglomeration. The novelty of the proposed approach is in the fact that until now, no attempts have been made to study the agglomeration identity of the population using the social network materials. The purpose of the article is to study the perception and reflection of the identity policy by residents of the Perm agglomeration in social networks.

The topic of the study seems significant for the following reasons. First, an effective state identity policy is considered to be based on the processes of forming territorial identity "from below" (Grishin, 2020). As long as "the identity is an important resource for the development of communities" (Identity..., 2023, p. 11), this statement is equally relevant for local, city, regional, or national levels. Secondly, due to the peculiarities of the modern lifestyle, a significant part of the communication of urban areas takes place on social networks. Thirdly, interpersonal communication on socially significant issues of a certain urban area is an important link in the formation of a cohesive community, an informal institution of civil society.

The Perm agglomeration together with the Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and Ufa agglomerations is part of the unique "Ural urban square". By the end of 2020, this agglomeration had already adopted the Strategy, Concept, and Program for the development of the agglomeration. Inter-municipal agreements that fit into the Strategy for the socio-economic development of the subject of the Russian Federation were developed and were in effect. At the same time, regional laws on agglomerations and territorial planning schemes for the Perm agglomeration have not been developed (Belozerov, Shchitova & Sopnev, 2021, p. 23). The Perm agglomeration is monocentric with a megalopolis core. It includes the cities of Perm, Dobryanka, Krasnokamsk, ZATO Zvezdny, as well as, Perm, Dobryansky, Krasnokamsky municipal districts (Spengler et al., 2023, p. 911).

Experts believe that agglomerations with the highest possible population are more economically efficient: it is the core of the agglomeration that "determines the quality of life in the agglomeration" (Rego, 2017). Perm became a city with a population of over a million in the 1980s; however, it did not retain this status during the difficult time at the turn of the century: from 1991 to 2000, the number of residents here decreased by 188.3 thousand people (Animitsa, Vlasova & Silin, 2024, p. 52). Perm again received the status of a megalopolis after 2010 (Nozdrina & Shneiderman, 2022, p. 10). The population growth is very slow: in 2016 the population of the Perm agglomeration was 1 million 350 thousand people (p. 8), whereas in 2023

this figure was 1 million 372 thousand people (Spengler et al., 2023, p. 914). The main demographic problem of this agglomeration is gradual aging. In the 2010s, economists noted the low attractiveness of this territory for external regional migrants (Logvinov, 2022, p. 593). If in 2023 there was an insignificant influx of migrants from other CIS countries, mainly from South Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), then in 2024 there was a small but negative balance. According to the experts, the Perm agglomeration is characterized by stagnating (Spengler et al., 2023, p. 914) precisely due to the "conservation" of the population (the growth rate of its population from 2012 to 2022 was only 5.4% with depopulation of the distant periphery (Stroyev & Kuznetsov, 2023, p. 6347)), although there is a reason to speak about the preservation of ambitions associated with economic rivalry with the Yekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk agglomerations.

The territorial identity of the residents of Perm and the Perm region (Nazukina, 2022a; 2022b; 2024), as well as the specifics of the discourse of the head of the region on issues of territorial identity policy in the Perm agglomeration (Popova & Grishin, 2024) are quite actively studied by Russian scholars. While constructing the territorial identity, the right to establish the "name" of the population surely belongs to elite groups that address people as citizens or use regional names. Important techniques include declaring the uniqueness of territory and residents, forming various regional brands, using slogans associated with the area, "semantic clichés about the regional character, regional spirit, specificity of the "land", specific brands of the region, names of "cultural heroes"" (Nazukina, 2022b, p. 73). Researchers have a clear understanding that it is cultural policy in its symbolic dimension that plays a leading role: "it institutionalizes key symbols and narratives of communities, allows them to be reproduced through a wide range of events at different levels of territoriality," and allows "to actualize the meanings of belonging to a place or markers of its exclusivity" (2022a, p. 329).

Theoretical framework and method

Agglomeration identity is methodologically challenging to study. The main approaches to studying this issue were formed in the 2010s.

The fact of identity toward the agglomeration among the agglomeration population remains a subject of heated debate. Researchers such as the German scientist W. Knapp who studied the case of the Rhine-Ruhr area (1998), the Italian urbanist F. Sbetti who examined the urban areas of Italy (2014), the Finnish researcher J. Häkli (2020), all tended to give a skeptical answer to the question of existence of any "agglomeration identity" among the residents.

However, the opposite point of view on this question has recently prevailed among scholars. Theories that reveal the specificity of "agglomeration identity" in comparison with more traditional types of territorial identity have received particular development. The most original views are those of the Dutch scientist K. Terlouw who suggested that the bearer of such an identity may not be the popu-

lation of the agglomeration as a whole, but particular and even singular representatives, distinguished by certain types of professional and economic activity (Terlouw, 2009). In accordance with this approach, agglomeration identity refers to a "thin" type of identity, which is focused not so much on culture and historical experience, but on economic interests and images of the future, and is more individualistic. Thus, the plurality of identities is manifested not only in the fact that one person can be the bearer of several territorial identities (for example, towards a municipality, agglomeration, region), but also in the fact that some individuals identify themselves with territories of different levels of generalization. The Swedish researcher A. Lindström was one of the first to formulate the patterns of agglomeration identity: he revealed that the larger the agglomeration, the stronger population's identity towards this agglomeration is, and also that a decentralized model (in particular, a polycentric agglomeration) contributes to the development of agglomeration identity (Lidström, 2013).

One of the first large-scale empirical studies of agglomeration identity was conducted by Catalan researchers J.-J. Vallbé, J. Magre and M. Tomàs in 2013, who developed a methodology for revealing the identity towards the Barcelona metropolitan area among the population. They proposed indicators that are important for detecting agglomeration identity in large groups of respondents (Vallbé, Magre & Tomàs, 2018).

In developing the methodology of our study, we used the experience gained earlier in empirical studies of agglomeration identity. We took into account the programs and projects of territorial identity policy implemented by government bodies and non-political actors in 16 Russian agglomerations having a megalopolis core. We conducted an expert survey of scientists living in these agglomerations, and analyzed the discourse of politicians, which allowed us to reveal the main directions of territorial identity policy implementation. We were interested in the extent to which the key topics of discussion in social networks chats in these urban areas correspond to the main vectors of this policy. The following 12 main aspects were identified: a) holidays and memorial days; b) cultural events dedicated to specific people; c) exhibitions; d) museum expositions; d) theatrical performances; e) monuments; g) toponymy (names of the streets, schools, organizations); h) training courses in schools, lyceums, colleges; i) local history research and findings related to the history of the territory; j) discussion/solution of environmental problems; k) projects promoting the integration of migrants from other regions of the country; m) local projects for the integration of labor migrants from other countries.

The *VKontakte* network remains quite popular among Russian citizens. It has a large number of open groups discussing everyday problems of territorial communities. The final sample of our research included 17 VKontakte-groups related to the Perm agglomeration, created directly by the residents. The sample groups were selected based on four parameters. They were initiated and administered by Perm residents themselves, as well as other settlements and municipalities

related to the Perm agglomeration. The groups were not narrowly thematic but rather devoted to various problems of their settlement. A large number of participants are registered and active in them.

The period chosen for the study from the beginning of January 2023 to the end of April 2024 made it possible to level out fluctuations in the intensity of communication that arise due to summer holidays, the summer cottage season, and periods of spring and autumn sickness.

To study the population's reaction to the identity policy pursued by regional, city and local authorities based on data from VKontakte-groups, the following algorithm was used. After installing the Python pandas and pymorphy2 libraries on the computer (the first of these programs is intended to be used in management and data analysis, and the second – for morphological analysis of the texts in Russian), the work was performed to identify and classify keywords based on an artificial intelligence (AI) model. Posts processed by an expert were included in the developed AI model and a command was given to select the main keywords by topic and develop a dictionary based on this (keywords), where each key was the name of a category (e.g., "Holidays and memorable days", "Cultural events", etc.); the value of each key was a list of main words corresponding to a given category. This dictionary was then used to categorize the analyzed text.

The subsequent setup and initialization of the morphological analyzer from the pymorphy2 library was used to generate various morphological forms of words from the base ones contained in the keywords. A function was developed, for generating word forms (generate_word_forms), which accepted a word from the developed dictionary (keywords) as input and returned all possible forms of this word generated using the morphological analyzer. This function increased the accuracy of word matching in the texts, which is especially important when classifying texts by categories. A sorted file with tables was obtained, which was further processed in the .EXLS format. As a result, the issues and aspects of territorial identity policy that were of most interest to the population of the Perm agglomeration were revealed. At the final stage of data processing, tables reflecting the most significant results of the analysis were prepared.

Results of the empirical study

The information in Table 1 shows the activity of discussions by residents of the Perm agglomeration of processes and events related to the territorial identity policy being carried out in their settlements. From the beginning of 2023 to the end of April 2024, 25.28% of posts and 27.71% of comments from the total number of issues discussed in online communities were devoted to this topic. This is a low figure, considering that the activity of discussions in Perm territorial communities of holidays and memorable days is not least associated with the 300th anniversary of Perm, which took place in 2023. Such an anniversary date is a significant "point of reflection that is directly related to key identity questions: "Who are we?",

"Where are we going?" (Nazukina, 2024, p. 414). The celebration of the anniversary is traditionally accompanied by a large number of cultural events, which residents usually discuss actively on social networks. For the anniversary, the city launched the Perm-300 project with a very ambiguous slogan "Everything is real!" This phrase turned out to be so successful that in 2024, which was declared the Year of the Family, it was built into a new slogan: "When we are together, everything is real."

Table 1. "Tone" of the posts of the residents of the Perm agglomeration on the topics of urban and local identity politicsin Vkontakte-groups (January 1, 2023 – April 30, 2024)

Topic areas of discussion	Positive tone	Neutral tone	Negative tone	Complex (multidirectional) assessment	Total posts by topic	Rank position by number of posts on the topic
Toponymy	1207	6046	1475	254	8982	1
Holidays and memorable days	1539	2144	115	252	4050	2
Cultural events	870	2351	110	137	3468	3
Educational courses	466	1847	443	191	2947	4
Theatrical productions	258	1406	42	40	1746	5
Ecological problems	180	845	35	44	1104	6
Monuments	80	561	30	17	688	7
Museum expositions	105	439	11	33	588	8
Exhibitions	43	219	10	9	281	9
Policy towards migrants from other regions of the Russian Federation	16	80	29	1	126	10
Policy towards labor migrants from other countries	3	21	2	1	27	11
Local history	1	2	0	0	3	12
Total posts on identity policy events for the period under study	4768	15961	2302	979	24010	
Number of posts for the period under study on topics not related to identity policy	10424	51270	7953	1335	70982	
Total posts in online communities for the period under study	15192	67231	10255	2314	94992	

* **Data source:** compiled by the authors based on calculations of the content of texts in VKontakte-groups using Big Data technology

The results of the analysis showed that the greatest interest among the Perm agglomeration residents was aroused by such aspects of the symbolic identity

policy as the names of various geographical objects in the region (rank position 1: 37.4% of all posts connected with territorial identity issues). With a significant gap, 2nd, 3rd and 4th rank positions were occupied by residents' messages dedicated to memorable days and holidays (16.87%), cultural events (14.44%), as well as to the courses related to local history in schools and special educational institutions (12.27%).

Table 2. Reactions of participants in urban online communities to posts on VKontakte about directions of urban and local identity politics (January 1, 2023 – April 30, 2024)

Post topics	Number of views	Rank position by number of views	Number of likes / dislikes	Rank position by number of likes /dislikes	Number of comments	Rank position by number of comments	Number of reposts	Rank position by number of reposts
Toponymy	146429031	1	992479	1	135655	1	327096	1
Holidays and memorable days	64445721	2	575829	2	38614	2	167547	2
Cultural events	59870693	3	444396	3	37224	3	155172	3
Educational courses	39718220	4	225815	4	35924	4	84369	4
Theatrical productions	26071150	5	177513	5	18819	5	65398	5
Ecological problems	14751339	6	124399	6	8605	6	33684	6
Monuments	12445470	7	116693	7	7222	7	19486	8
Museum expositions	9162767	8	60581	8	4229	8	19746	7
Exhibitions	4823283	9	33714	9	3038	9	12323	9
Policy towards migrants from other regions of the Russian Federation	1427396	10	12120	10	2106	10	2838	10
Policy towards labor migrants from other countries	316918	11	1200	11	119	11	393	11
Local history	43211	12	396	12	18	12	122	12

* **Data source:** compiled by the authors based on calculations of the content of texts in VKontakte-groups using Big Data technology

The next most frequently posted blog entries are dedicated to theatrical productions in the Perm region and to the people living there (rank position 5: 7.27%), as well as to the possibility of residents' participating in solving environmental problems in their territory (rank position 6: 4.6%). Next, with a significant decrease in frequency, come posts about monuments (rank position 7: 2.87%) and museum expositions (rank position 8: 2.54%). The last posts in the ranking are on such thematic areas as exhibitions, events for the integration of migrants from other regions of Russia and labor immigrants from foreign countries, and local history discoveries (rank positions 9–12) and turned out to be extremely rare in the VKontakte-groups of residents of the Perm agglomeration.

The tone of the posts is also noteworthy. Neutral messages dominate in all thematic areas. However, the balance of positive and negative statements in tone is negative in two of the 12 areas; this concerns the current toponomic policy, as well as the policy towards migrants from other regions of the Russian Federation.

The activity of the Internet audience reaction (Table 2) shows the proportionality of the number of publications in thematic areas to the number of views, reposts, "likes" and comments. Some insignificant differences in positions on these indicators are observed only in reactions to the posts related to the topics of museum expositions, exhibitions and monuments. "Likes", as the most spontaneous emotional reaction, are often given by people even without carefully reading the post, but rather, record recognition of the significance of the topic under discussion. The analyzed comments are most often shallow, not implying the development of discussions. The number of reposts turned out to be significantly higher in all areas than the number of comments. It seems that residents of the Perm agglomeration are a kind of "people of action" for whom it is easier to make a post to their personal page than to conduct a discussion.

The proportion of the number of comments and reposts to the number of publications on the relevant topic shows the interest of online communication participants in various areas of identity politics. The results of this ranking option are presented in Table 3.

Some results were unexpected. The number of posts about the policy being conducted in Perm Krai towards migrants from other regions of the Russian Federation was extremely insignificant (it showed only the 10th position in frequency), but the activity of commenting put this topic in the first position in importance. The low activity of copying and commenting on posts about labor migrants from other countries is most likely due to a certain taboo of discussing this topic in the public space. People, on the one hand, are well aware of the vector of the migration policy being conducted in Russia at present. On the other hand, they read information about offenses and incidents on the Internet. The rates of copying posts about areas related to cultural policy (cultural events, holidays and memorial days, exhibitions) are higher.

Table 3. Intensity of discussions by members of urban online communities on VKontakte of posts on the directions of urban and local identity policy of residents of the Perm agglomeration (January 1, 2023 – April 30, 2024)

Topic areas of discussion	Total posts	Commenting activity (proportion of the number of comments to the number of posts in the topic area)	Rank position of commenting activity	Post copying activity (proportion of the number of copies to the number of posts in the topic area)	Rank position of post copying activity
Policy towards migrants from other regions of Russia	126	16,7	1	22,5	11
Toponymy	8982	15,1	2	36,4	7
Educational courses	2947	12,2	3	28,6	9
Exhibitions	281	10,8	4-5	43,9	2
Theatrical productions	1746	10,8	4-5	37,5	5
Cultural events	3468	10,7	6	44,7	1
Monuments	688	10,5	7	28,3	10
Holidays and memorial days	4050	9,5	8	41,4	3
Ecological problems	1104	7,8	9	30,5	8
Museum expositions	588	7,2	10	33,6	6
Local history	3	6	11	40,7	4
Policy towards labor migrants from other countries	27	4,4	12	14,5	12

* Data source: compiled by the authors based on calculations of the content of texts in VKontakte groups using Big Data technology

Conclusion

The conducted analysis shows a very high level of attention and awareness of social network users about identity politics in the urban agglomeration. The obtained results allow us to establish which areas of activity of local and regional authorities in the sphere of identity politics find the greatest resonance and have the greatest impact on the state of public sentiment in the local community. Since the Perm agglomeration is comparable in its main characteristics to most Russian agglomerations with centers in cities with over one million inhabitants, the obtained results may be significant for understanding the general trends in the attitude of agglomerations' residents to identity politics.

The tools used in this study are promising for the modern development of the methodology for identifying and analyzing issues of agglomeration identity. The features of posted material in social networks correspond to the interpretation of agglomeration identity as a "thin identity". Social networks are obviously of limited importance for detecting the identity of agglomerations in large groups of the population, but are a valuable source for studying this type of "thin" identity at the individual level. The obtained results, revealing the most pressing issues of identity policy for agglomeration residents, can be significant for optimizing the policy of constructing identity in Russian urban agglomerations.

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