Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North

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8. Ethnicity on the Move

National-Cultural Organisations in Siberia

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As in the previous chapter, devoted to the development of ethnic cultural production in the period from the Soviet era to post-Soviet Russia, the subject of the discussion here will be the relationship between ethnicity and lifestyle of the diverse peoples in Siberia. However, apart from changing the geographic setting from the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to the more southerly located Irkutsk Oblast and the Republic of Buryatia, I will shift the research focus away from describing the more general aspects of cultural production in the former Soviet Union to analysing specific forms of human behaviour, arising from the regular involvement of people in the activities of ethnicity-based organisations (“national-cultural organisations”).

Drawing from the results of my fieldwork in the administrative centres of the two regions — the city of Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude respectively — throughout the year 2011, I attempt to provide a brief introduction to the history of ethnic diversity in the Baikal region and the interconnection of the concept of lifestyle and ethnic activism. Further, I seek to demonstrate how the complex changes in post-Soviet Russia have affected the members of such organisations, broadening or reducing the existing disparities between them, setting certain boundaries for their activism in purely geographic terms as well as making symbolic self-presentation an integral part of their lifestyle.
Ethnic diversity in the Baikal region

Located in the southern section of East Siberia, Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude are the political and economic centres of two separate, but neighbouring administrative units: Irkutsk Oblast and the Republic of Buryatia, lying on the two opposite shores of Lake Baikal (henceforth both units are referred to as “Baikal region”). As it manifests itself through the names of the regions, the Republic of Buryatia is a nationality republic with a population of 970,000 people, in which its titular nationality, the Buryats, constitutes roughly one third of the republic population, and equals to about half of the Russian population of Buryatia (Census of 14 October 2010). As a result of the Bolshevik nationalities policy, the Buryats were granted a territorially bounded autonomy of their own, which initially covered much of the region around Lake Baikal, but in the 1930s was divided into what is today the Republic of Buryatia on the eastern side of Lake Baikal and Ust’-Orda Buryat Okrug in Irkutsk Oblast on the opposite side (see Chapter 5 in this volume). Today in Irkutsk Oblast, with its almost 2.5 million inhabitants (2010), the Buryats constitute an even smaller fraction of the population, numerically dominated by ethnic Russians, who started to settle in the region from the seventeenth century onwards. In the subsequent centuries of the Tsarist era, the local ethnic diversity was considerably enhanced through both voluntary migration and state-directed relocations of ethnic minorities from the central and westernmost parts of the Russian Empire to Siberia. As a result of the Tsarist relocation policies, the region saw a gradual arrival of the Tatar, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Chuvash people from the more poverty- and famine-stricken parts of the country and the foundation of their settlements across Siberia, especially in proximity to the then built Trans-Siberian Railway.

In the later periods (notably, from the 1930s to the 1980s), the number of ethnic communities inhabiting the region tended to rise even more as the territory was to become a destination for the deported Lithuanian and Polish people as well as for voluntary workers and Komsomol youth from the Soviet Union’s nationality republics who were willing to take part in the construction of large-scale industrial projects in Siberia. Particularly noteworthy here is the building of Baikal-Amur Railway, north of lake Baikal in East Siberia, which came to mobilise
ethnically diverse peoples from different Soviet republics who were made responsible for the construction and maintenance of particular railway stations or settlements. Last but not least, ethnic diversification in the Soviet era was considerably facilitated through educational and professional mobility of the population as well as military rotations throughout the Soviet Union. In this chapter, I will use the term “old-time residents” when speaking about these ethnic groups who arrived in the region in Tsarist times, and also to those who came during the Soviet period. Following the democratisation reforms (perestroika) in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and especially with the formation of the Russian Federation in 1991, ethnic minorities of the country were allowed by the new legislation to establish their cultural organisations, designed to promote their national culture and language. Under these circumstances, “national-cultural organisations” (henceforth — NCOs) came to be set up by ethnic minority activists throughout the country. As Siberia was no exception in this process, its old-time residents began to perceive the establishment of NCOs as an important leverage for articulating their relationship with their original homeland both through symbolic means and physical movement.

Starting from the 1990s and even more so in the 2000s, the ethnic makeup of Siberia got even more complex, as the region became a destination for migrant workers and their households both from the independent states of the former Soviet Union (in particular, economic migrants from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and some other labour-sending countries outside the post-Soviet space (such as China and Vietnam). For example, by the end of the 2000s, the cities of Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude had an increasing community of residents originating from Kyrgyzstan. As most of them — predominantly, male persons — have been involved in retail trade on the city markets, working seasonally for a number of years, it has been not uncommon for the members of their households (including wives and children) to move to the same locations in Siberia and settle there as permanent dwellers. As a result of household migration to Russia, a considerable number of these people would find themselves nostalgic of their ethnic home, while the younger generation had to be socialised at Russian schools and universities. This in turn has been an important factor that motivated migrants’ families during their sojourn in
Siberia to attend seriously to the issues of establishing their national-cultural organisations. In contrast to the “old-time residents”, I will conventionally refer to this group of population as “newcomers” in the chapter.

Ethnic activism and lifestyle: paradigms of research

In my view, the case of ethnic activism is valuable for the analysis of lifestyles in present-day Russia for a number of reasons: first, activism as a social phenomenon has been uniting a considerable number of ethnically diverse people, who by virtue of their commitment to the collective cause, have pursued common practices and engaged in similar interactions. Considering the formally voluntary and non-commercial character of NCOs, most of their members have not been rewarded financially for their contribution from any external sources. Rather, members have had to resort to investing their own resources to keep their organisations functioning. Indeed, while the involvement in the activities of ethnic organisations in Russia has been underpinned by certain patterns of spending and consumption (such as buying material accoutrement for staging an ethnic performance), a great number of NCO members still agreed to the expenditures, considering them as either justified or inevitable.

Second, the problem of choice as “a fundamental component of day-to-day activity” (Giddens 1999: 80) has been underlying most of the routine activities of ethnic activists in Russia. The necessity to make practical decisions, choosing the most efficient way of securing the required resources, has been underpinned from a broader perspective by the personal choice to join the organisation and sign up to its cause. The particular strategies employed by the activists in the process of making important or consequential decisions have been commonly based on the narratives of self-identity, turning the process of decision-making into an individually meaningful enterprise. I would point here to the importance for ethnic activists of “sensibilities”, defined by David Chaney as “a perceived affiliation for an identifiable group with certain ideas or values or tastes in music, food or dress” and presumably governing their major decisions (Chaney 1996: 126; see also Chapters 1 and 7 in this volume).
In what follows, I am going to focus on the ethnic sensibilities of individuals — those centring on their original homeland or by contrast those relating to their current stay in Siberia. The former relationship has most clearly manifested itself through the mobility of NCO members, whose sense of nostalgia and attachment to a particular ancestral location have not only motivated them to visit the places associated with their origin (further referred to as their “original” or “ethnic home”), but have also presented them with certain dilemmas as to whether to return or stay in the current place of residence (referred to as their “new home”).

The latter relationship in turn could find expression through multiple social engagements and events which have enabled ethnic activists to display and emphasise their ethnicity during their stay in Siberia. In this sense, the reproduction and stylisation of ethnicity by NCO members during public festivals in urban areas have been likewise based on certain choice-making, involving the narratives of one’s “self”. As my data suggest, both traveling and visual self-presentation practices have been equally important to the ethnic activists in Siberia, presumably, constituting the core of a specific lifestyle.

Moreover, the involvement of NCO members has been underpinned by certain disparities and divides among different groups of activists — conditioned inter alia by their social status, gender, and the centrality/peripherality of their location — which in turn have provided them with an agenda for collective mobilisation. Using the assumption that the complex infrastructural changes that took place in Siberia — and more broadly in Russia — over the last years (see Chapter 2) had unequal circumstances for different cohorts of arrivals and therefore accentuated the existing disparities among them, I am going to address the issue of ethnic activism in Russia as an institutionalised phenomenon. I emphasise the centrality of NCO members’ attempts to diminish such disparities and to equalise their social status.

In this respect, some further elaboration of the difference between “old-time residents” and “newcomers” is required here. Indeed, in the context of Russia, the boundary between the two groups has been particularly fluid, given the complex history of population mobility on its territory over different periods. More precisely, just as the influx of newcomers to Siberia has led to the crystallisation of “new” ethnic communities, so too most of its “old-time residents” today represent
either the first generation of socially integrated and locally settled migrant people or their descendants, trying to re-establish lost ties with their ethnic homeland. From this perspective, my research has been about the consecutive stages of a typical migration process with its logics and constraints on different generations of people.

Based on the migration paradigm, the comparison of the two groups might not only lie in the diachronic aspects of their relative arrival in Siberia, but also in the synchronic analysis of how the past and current changes — both infrastructural and technological — have affected the opportunities of people for maintaining contacts with their original homeland and consequently limited or facilitated their lifestyle choices in a particular period. Contrary to what might be expected, the breakup of the Soviet Union did not solely mean economic turmoil and closure of transportation routes; rather, the new circumstances made possible diverse forms of relating with home and living between two regions or countries. Transnationalism as a form of migration, by which individuals retain strong connections with the place of exodus, has recast the character of ethnic activism in Siberia, making the issue of reaching out to one’s ethnic homeland less of a problem (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992; Appadurai 1996; Ong 1999; Vertovec 2009).

The role of NCOs in this process has been to respond to the needs and aspirations of its members by serving either as a facility to reach out to the country of origin or conversely as a condition of staying away from “home”.

At the same time, both “old-time residents” and “newcomers” can be juxtaposed in the light of the ethnic minority paradigm as members of their respective ethnic communities in their “new home”. Indeed, a particular lifestyle of ethnic activists has also found expression through their willingness to maintain certain material manifestations of their ethnicity (dress, craft, cuisine, etc.) and to display some of them during public events or festivals. NCOs have in turn provided an institutional platform to those residents of the region who have made a choice to uphold their “sense of difference” and assert it in public. The arrival of newcomers to Siberia has made it possible for the latter to resort to the same symbolic resources as the old-time residents, notably through the public display of ethnicity on special occasions. In the context of Russia, however, the need to respond to the challenges associated with
ethnic-minority status, such as xenophobia and mistreatment in public spaces, has evidently been a factor discouraging potential activists from more active modes of engagement. For this reason, to many activists, public displays of ethnicity presumably evolve into acts of asserting their sense of “equality” rather than of “difference”. NCOs could be used by their members as a facility for this task.

**Divides and disparities among ethnic activists in Siberia**

In this section, my aim is to show how the peculiar lifestyle of ethnic activists in Siberia has been conditioned *inter alia* by certain divides and disparities among them. To this end, I will first dwell upon the intensity and degree of people’s involvement in the activities of NCOs, outlining the existing modes of their engagement. Further, I will also elaborate on the issues of gender and rural-urban divides between ethnic activists and show their unequal significance for the long-term residents and newcomers to the region.

**Intensity and degree of engagement**

For the sake of analysis, I refer to the following categories of participants, as enumerated by political scientists Passy & Giugni (2001) and including: “subscribers” (those staying formally outside the organisation, but contributing to its activities financially), “adherents” (members who are active on an irregular basis), and “activists” (members who are regularly active in the organisation) (Passy & Giugni 2001: 132). Schematic as the division between the three categories might be, it nonetheless provides us with an opportunity to define more precisely the role played by different stakeholders engaged in the organisation’s activities.

“Subscribers” have been defined by me as non-members who are sympathetic with the cause of the organisation and tend to provide support to its members. Indeed, most of the collective efforts of a relatively small number of ethnic activists in both regions have relied on and appealed to the sense of ethnic solidarity that unites people sharing a particular ethnic identity. Establishing ties and connections with the ethnic fellows, standing high on the social ladder or having
some economic leverages, has been key to the success of their most important ventures, while the presence of individuals (notably, ethnic entrepreneurs) who feel called upon to provide help or assist in getting things done has constituted an important form of social capital for the activists of NCOs. Of course, the clusters of relationships, based on ethnic solidarity, extend far beyond the formal membership in ethnic organisations and, as such, have been characteristic not only of ethnic activists in Siberia. Rather, ethnic identity — overlapping in some cases with religious identity — has been an important form of social capital, which could be well converted into certain material benefits by the leaders of the organisations, acting to motivate other members and secure some external funding at the same time.

“Adherents”, or those affiliates of NCOs active only on an irregular basis, have probably constituted the most numerous and heterogenous group of members. To some, their membership came as an initially unintended event as they were invited by someone else to attend the organisation’s meetings. But even having become a member, most of them, confronted with certain time and money constraints, would tend to stay outside active modes of engagement with the organisations’ matters and pursue some other economically more rewarding activities. Partly for this reason, the younger generation, represented mainly by students of local universities, figure prominently as adherents of NCOs.

“Activists”, those performing daily chores and taking up responsibility on a regular basis, have constituted the backbone of NCOs. Indeed, the voluntary and non-paid character of work pursued by these people, has required them both certain emotional commitment and material contribution, translating into a specific lifestyle. The chapter is therefore primarily about NCO “activists”, while the stories that follow are provided to illustrate their lifestyle. It seems natural that NCOs should be run by “activists” (rather than “adherents” or “subscribers”), yet as my data suggest, leadership positions have not always been claimed by the more “active” personnel, as these positions are in some cases a merely formal or honorary duty. Drawing on my own fieldwork data, I would provide the following schematic classification of NCO “leaders”. First, I would refer here to “figureheads” as those formal leaders vested with high symbolic status, but whose everyday input into the
organisation’s matters remains limited. Second, I would point to a special category of “cultural brokers” as individuals actively engaged in the process of interpreting or renegotiating the ideas of a group’s ethnic identity. Normally, these individuals come from educated backgrounds and are often employed as academic researchers, teachers, librarians, or art workers. As members of ethnic minority organisations and, notably, their formal leaders, these people commonly aim to ensure “ethnic revival” among their peers or act as formulators of the organisation’s intellectual agenda. Third, I would also mention “managers”, i.e. ethnic activists mostly engaged in the resolution of practical questions or addressing the immediate issues of the respective community. Indeed, as my observation suggests, most of the organisations of newcomers have been led by individuals with a background in law or of running their own businesses in the region — those who can either afford to rent an office in the urban area or provide their own premises as a possible meeting place.

Gender divide between activists

Gender status is one of the basic parameters determining the mode and intensity of people’s engagement in the activities of NCOs. The issue of gender inequality and, in particular, the persisting domination of men over women in many settings of the public sphere in Russia has been addressed in previous research, but the reverse situation in which women dominate men as formal or non-formal leaders of public organisations or any other collectivities has been rarely dealt with by scholars (Kay 2007; Kulmala 2010; Vladimirova & Habeck 2018). Indeed, the available ethnographic material from Siberia not only provides us with ample evidence of women’s regular involvement in the functioning of ethnicity-based organisations, but also reveals the specifically gendered distribution of roles inside them. Thus, in many cases men numerically prevail as the leaders or “subscribers” of organisations in Russia, while women are obviously predominant as rank-and-file activists and adherents, responsible for the bulk of the work, which in turn might reflect a more general social trend characterising the functioning of other “cultural leisure” institutions in Russia (cf. Habeck, Donahoe & Gruber 2011).
Considering the gender divide among the NCO members, my assumption is that those ethnic communities whose cultural imperatives of patriarchal society have generally discouraged public participation of women in the political sphere, could have a similar bias against their formal leadership as part of ethnic organisations abroad. The recent trend for the feminisation of economic migration, which has affected Russia among other countries, not only brought about a rising number of women moving to Siberia from such countries as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan as part of their households, but also led some of them to join cultural organisations in Siberian cities. Having established themselves as members of the organisation (frequently as relatives of the male activists), women have mostly engaged themselves in the activities of these organisations as rank-and-file cultural performers or backstage assistants, excluded from the actual decision-making process. At the same time, for many women, leadership positions came to be accessible following the elevation of their status from “newcomer” to the “old-time resident”. Indeed, my observation is that those women who run NCOs, catering to the newcomers, have the advantage of being either a long-term resident, sometimes more advanced in age (such as apa, or senior lady, among Turkic peoples), or enjoying higher educational qualifications than the rest of the members. Despite that, the possible pressures on the female leaders could be still high enough, also given that the incessant influx of their ethnic fellows to the region has constantly intensified competition between the old-timers and newcomers. As one of the female leaders of a Kyrgyz organisation in Siberia once privately remarked to the author, her leadership position in the organisation had been occasionally contested by some of her country-fellows on the grounds of her being a woman. The result was the formation of a second Kyrgyz organisation, set up by newly arrived people. Despite that, she has retained her post as a well-educated lawyer and a person who has stayed in a Siberian city for a long period.

Rural-urban divide between activists
The ability of people to pursue different activities as NCO members has been also dependent on the centrality/peripherality of a particular location and the availability of roads and transportation connecting
remote locations with the administrative centre. In practice, we can, probably, distinguish between two distinct types of organisations: one corresponding to urban areas (gorodskaja organizatsiia) and the other corresponding to rural districts (sel’kskaia organizatsiia). As I will show further below, the two distinct types of locations presuppose strikingly different capacities in terms of ethnic activists’ access to material and social resources, which in part explains different scopes of the organisations’ activities. Living thousands of miles away from their original home, many of the ethnic activists in Siberia have never been outside their current region of residence, but still maintain family histories and try to transmit their ethnic culture to the younger generation. To some extent, activism of people in rural areas has also been kindled by the presence of historical sites or institutions, including museums and temples, which require collective efforts to be maintained or repaired. This task in turn has been possible in many cases through the support of city-based organisations, which have commonly been able to use the centrality of their location to secure material assistance and information. Of particular importance in this process are the attempts of urban activists to cross the space between the diverse geographically remote locations across Siberia and thus to reach out to the rural communities. Given the vast territorial dimensions of the region and the dramatic difficulties in transportation services in past years, this task has been rather costly and time-consuming; it depended not only on the availability of vehicles, but also on the strong commitment of people.

While for the long-term residents of Siberia, travelling across the region has been part and parcel of their lifestyle within NCOs, the issue of mobility has had quite a different twist for the newcomers. Attracted by the economic opportunities of the city, a bulk of them has been engaged in diverse activities in the urban (rather than the rural) area, working on trade markets or in the service industry. The lack of incentive for visiting the countryside has been countered, however, by the relative importance of other mobility patterns.

**Original home and mobility**

In this section, I intend to show how the physical mobility of ethnic activists has presented itself as a ground for making lifestyle choices,
and how NCOs are seen by their members either as a facility to reach out to the place of origin or conversely as a condition of staying away from the ethnic home. Previously, I have pointed to the importance for those people who wish to emphasise their ethnicity to make the decision to engage in certain patterns of consumption and participate in the activities of ethnic organisations. Covering large geographic distances as part of their activities in NCOs, a great number of people have been ready to invest considerable material resources (such as, for example, their own savings) into their leisure activities, which are viewed by Chaney as being “increasingly experienced by individuals as the basis of their social identity” (Chaney 1996: 112).

Based on a comparison between the destination country (Russia) and the place of current residency (e.g. Central Asia), spatial imaginaries (cf. Chapter 5 in this volume) have played a crucial role in shaping people’s decisions to move. In this respect, rational choice theory that explains human decisions exclusively by pragmatic or economic motivations, cannot fully account for the choice of those ethnic activists who may decide to stay in economically less favourable locations or spend personal means on collectively significant trips. The state of in-between, which arises from the double allegiance of many migrants and the perception of home as something malleable, depends considerably on their emotional attachments and moral obligations, in which both representations of Siberia and that of their original homeland figure prominently. The life stories that follow in this section belong to the “old-time residents”, since the issue of mobility seems to be of greater concern for this group. Despite that, I am aware of the outlined dichotomy and try to refer to “newcomers” whenever possible.

Repatriation

All in all, those non-native inhabitants of Siberia, to whom maintaining a continual relationship with their original homeland remains a matter of particular concern, have been left with a number of options, or models. The most straightforward and in a sense “radical” option for them would be to leave the place of current residence and return for good to their homeland. In this sense, repatriation has a considerable overlap with other forms of mobility both in terms of the crucial role
of social imaginary for the potential travellers as well as the impact of individual economic circumstances on one’s personal decision to return — yet at the same time repatriation has its own distinctive character. First of all, much more than with other forms of mobility, return to the historical homeland is in many cases “justified” by the narratives of ethnic identity, emphasising emotional affiliation of the person to their ancestral land. This is, of course, not to say that a person’s ethnic identity is the prime criterion for making such a choice: rather, it is frequently contested by other concerns. Thus, for many long-term residents, making such a move would be quite a risk, and would require considerable personal commitment. It may seem easier to stay put due to a lack of accurate information about the original homeland or simply because of their personal inertia. Among the old-timers, repatriation as an option has been therefore more suitable for the relatively mobile younger generation of people while their membership in NCOs in some cases ha facilitated their choice to leave.

The mobility patterns associated with the repatriation of non-native ethnic minorities of Siberia (such as the Russian Jews, Germans, or Ukrainians) to their ethnic homeland were generated with the opening of the Soviet/Russian border at the beginning of the 1990s and since that time have tended to ebb and flow. Even though NCOs have not always been directly involved in the administration of repatriation programmes, they have been in many ways instrumental in this process, working closely with their managers (for example, Jewish cultural organisations and the Jewish “Sokhnut” repatriation agency) and providing those eager to leave with the necessary credentials of one’s ethnic background, the required information about the destination country, and a better command of its language.

In this respect, the story of Andrei, a young activist of the Ukrainian cultural centre in Irkutsk, is rather representative. At the time of field research, Andrei (aged 20) was one of the youngest and most active members of the Ukrainian cultural centre of Irkutsk. He joined the centre in 2008 after having been invited to one of its public events and since then has been investing his time learning and teaching the Ukrainian language as well as participating in most of the ethnic festivals organised by the centre. Possessing some Ukrainian background and having been to the Ukraine only as a small child, Andrei became gradually
interested in that country and his membership in the local Ukrainian cultural organisation catered to his ability to travel there once again. As a university student, Andrei tried to seize every opportunity to discover new places, despite his time and money constraints. Moreover, although he likes Irkutsk, he was determined to leave the city after the completion of his studies and ultimately to emigrate from Russia. Andrei’s decision to emigrate seems to have been shaped by different facts of his professional career. After joining the Ukrainian cultural centre, he got to know about the repatriation programmes for ethnic Ukrainians in Russia and then assisted with their implementation in the region. His knowledge about emigration opportunities continually grew as he was communicating regularly with his peers on social networking websites and regular travels as part of the organisation. My interview with Andrei touched upon his plans for the future and let him voice his attitude towards the issue of emigration:

Artem Rabogoshvili: Would you like to leave for Ukraine?

Andrei: This is one of my plans for the future.

AR: For permanent residency?

A: For permanent residency.

AR: Why? Because life is more convenient there or because your roots are there?

A: Because I don’t like this country…

AR: What about Ukraine?

A: In Ukraine it is much easier. People have a more easy-going mindset there. They are kinder and there is no trouble-making on every occasion there. I appreciate that

AR: Do you have many friends willing to go abroad for permanent residency?

A: Quite a lot. And many of them are taking some concrete steps in this direction.
AR: Where do people want to go?

A: Mainly, Eastern Europe — Lithuania, Ukraine, Serbia, Poland.

AR: Why do they choose [the countries of Central] Eastern Europe?

A: Well, difficult to say. [Central] Eastern Europe is developing rapidly now and many see its prospects. Or maybe it is easier for them to learn a Slavic language. Some of my friends have emigrated to Poland or Czech Republic. They have found Czech or Polish men or women and are doing well there.

Making occasional trips to the original home

More often than not, however, occasional travels outside the region have been to a greater or lesser degree possible for the majority of activists, which I mark here as the second possible option. Like in the case of the first option (permanent relocation), this model has been in many ways associated with crossing national or regional borders, while the ability of people to make such trips has varied considerably depending on the individual circumstances of activists. Trip-making to destinations outside Siberia among ethnic activists is based on quite a number of combined reasons and motivations, including a feeling of nostalgia or homesickness, a desire to visit relatives or friends, and the need to maintain business contacts or attend conferences or workshops. Diverse motivations of NCO members, based on their unequal social and citizenship status, have been conducive to the rise of different strategies and plans concerning their relationship with their country of origin or ancestry. We can distinguish here between two types of outbound travels: those within the Russian Federation and those outside its borders (depending on where the person’s historical homeland is), which in turn partly overlaps with the division between “long-time residents” and “newcomers” to the region.

Even though trip-making within the state’s borders can be seen as easier and less expensive in contrast to international mobility, the frequency of such travels for the members of NCOs depends heavily on the social background, economic circumstances, and the actual degree of their motivations and commitments, all of which are subject to change
with people’s age and life experience. In general, the involvement of the old-time inhabitants of Siberia in the work of NCOs has facilitated their mobility across the country through the allocation of funding for their trip or through information about travel opportunities.

To illustrate this situation, I would like to provide below the story of Gulnur, who is one of the oldest and most enthusiastic members of the Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre of Irkutsk. Although in her sixties now, she is not only actively contributing to the activities of the organisation today, but also regularly travels across Irkutsk Oblast for different cultural events and occasionally to Tatarstan — her native region. Gulnur’s travels started at the end of the 1950s, when her parents from Tatarstan were allocated housing in the Siberian city of Kemerovo, from where she later moved to Irkutsk to continue her studies. From that time on, she travelled quite extensively throughout different parts of the then Soviet Union, both alone and together with members of her family, either as part of well-organised tours or as an independent traveller. With the start of perestroika, and following the breakup of the Soviet state, her family found itself constrained financially. As a result, as an acting scholar and university professor, she had to cease attending academic conferences outside the region at that time. It was in this period at the beginning of the 1990s that Gulnur joined the recently established Tatar centre in Irkutsk. In her words, membership of the Tatar organisation has enabled her to share life experience and knowledge of Tatar culture with other Tatar people born outside Tatarstan but feeling interested in their family background.

By the 2000s, the economic conditions improved for Gulnur, affording her more opportunities to travel. The most memorable trips that she made in the past few years were those to Tatarstan and in both cases she was travelling as a member of the delegation of the Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre of Irkutsk. She recounts:

In the year 2005, I went to the 1000th anniversary of Kazan’\. The travel expenses for us, members of the Tatar ensemble, were assumed by the Tatar centre as a kind of reward for our active involvement. So, we bought a travel voucher at our own expense and the travel costs were borne by the centre. It was my first trip, really a big trip, which was paid for by the centre. But when in Tatarstan, we were somewhat frustrated that we couldn’t stop at all these familiar places due to the time constraints, so that my sisters and I swore that we would come here the following year. So
we did. Also, in 2010, Mintimer Shaimiev, President of Tatarstan, made up his mind to convene all the women who have made an important contribution to the development of Tatar culture in the country. Out of the total number of participants, 85 persons came from the former Soviet republics and 22 persons from the regions of Russia. There were two of us from Irkutsk Oblast. And this year, I was granted another reward trip, this time to Yekaterinburg for attending the federal Sabantui [see below] festival.

International mobility of ethnic activists has been to a great extent underpinned by the permeability of national borders and the existence of specific mechanisms enabling border-crossings. Visa-free travelling to most of the post-Soviet states (including Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and the emergence of new transportation routes has made it possible for some of them to cross the border with just their internal passport, while complicating matters for those originating from countries requiring a visa for entry (such as the Baltic states, Georgia, or Turkmenistan).

At the same time, the issue of making occasional trips home appears in an entirely different light for the newcomers. Indeed, the economic practices in which many of the recent arrivers have been engaged require a regular movement between countries (the practice of transnationalism), which has been an important factor of change in the region itself. Based on economic stimuli, the Baikal region came to be well-connected (both through air flights and bus lines) to the major destinations from which most economic migrants originate. Following the establishment of regular transport connections, most of the newcomers have found themselves in a comparatively favourable position, sometimes having better chances than the long-term residents of Siberia for maintaining physical ties with their ethnic homeland. Under these circumstances, NCOs would rather come up as institutions facilitating people’s temporary stay by renegotiating the concept of home, rather than as a facility enabling physical movement.

Renegotiating home locally

The third possible option for those feeling nostalgic, but yet not ready or unable to change their place of residence is to stay in touch with “home” through purely symbolic means, reproducing the familiar
cultural surroundings and seeking a sense of togetherness with fellow members of their ethnic group locally. Contrary to what might be expected, this model of relating with the place of origin has not been solely a hallmark of those already more enrooted in the region or less mobile individuals — rather it has been universally shared by most ethnic activists, including newcomers. However, the significance of this model has not been equal for all; given that for most of the newly arrived individuals, being outside their ethnic home often meant just a short interval before returning, while for those who were born in Siberia it frequently entails a once-in-a-lifetime trip. In both cases, membership of an NCO has offered people a chance to obtain support and carve out an existence away from their place of origin.

The story of Oleg, the leader of the Belarusian national-cultural organisation (Tovarishchestvo Belorusskoi Kul’tury), demonstrates how travelling within the region (in contrast to repatriation) has evolved into a marker of the specific lifestyle of ethnic activists in Siberia. I have known Oleg from the very beginning of my fieldwork in Irkutsk. Even before I came to the city, he had invited me to visit some of the cultural events organised by his centre. Born in Belarus in 1969, Oleg graduated from a military school in Tiumen’ and was subsequently commissioned as a military officer to Irkutsk. Having retired from military service, he stayed on in this Siberian city, where in 1996 he founded the Belarusian organisation and then started to make regular ethnographic trips to the Belarusian villages throughout Irkutsk Oblast. One of the reasons why I decided to interview Oleg was his rich experience of traveling across the Oblast and his ample knowledge of the region. Today, his organisation incorporates twelve local branches of the regional Belarusian cultural organisation across Irkutsk Oblast which have been functioning as a unified whole largely thanks to Oleg’s extensive travels even to the most remote places and villages, populated by Belarusian settlers or their descendants.

However, his commitment to the cause of his organisations has been frequently at variance with his actual ability to reach those locations, given the vast territory of the oblast and Oleg’s dependence on the public transport. With the collapse of the Soviet-time transportation system at the beginning of the 1990s and the establishment of his organisation he found it particularly challenging to get to some places, lying away from
the railroad and major bus lines. In the passage below, he described the situation with infrastructure in Irkutsk Oblast at the beginning of the 1990s:

My first trip to Tarnopol’ village in Balaganskii District was just after our association had been established in 1996. I remember my travelling there at my own expense after I had learned that there is a Belarusian village in that district. It was at that time the first Belarusian village that I happened to visit in Irkutsk Oblast. To get there, first I reached Zalari village by train, and then went to search for the bus station there and to ask the locals how to get to Tarnopol’. Those folks told me: “oh… you need to go to Balagansk first…” I asked them how to get to Balagansk, but they said: “oh… there won’t be any bus today… the next bus will be on Monday” [once per week]. [...] So, I had to cover about 130 kilometres, [hitchhiking and] changing transportation. For the first thirty kilometres I rode a motorcycle, sitting in its back seat, but I finished the journey sitting in the back of a lorry together with some local fishermen. Those guys asked me: “Where are you going?” saying kudi instead of kuda [where?]. At that moment, I realised at once they were from Tarnopol’, as they spoke with a Belarusian accent. I was happy to follow them and finally got to the village.

As the transportation infrastructure of Irkutsk Oblast started to change with the rise of mini-buses (marshrutki) at the beginning of the 2000s, Tarnopol’, like many other small and remote villages, became better connected with Irkutsk. To some extent, possessing a car would be a solution for many of those ethnic activists frequently traveling across the region and aiming to reach out to the small communities of their ethnic fellows in the rural area. In Oleg’s words, today he always has to arrange his trips with others, or to buy tickets in advance, but he has been reluctant to buy a vehicle, concerned with the possible expenses and preferring to spend money on his organisation instead. In any event, travelling across the region has evolved into a part of Oleg’s routine; while visiting localities associated with Belarusians, has to some extent offered him an alternative to returning to his original home for the permanent residence.

As we can see, the issue of maintaining relations with one’s historical home figures prominently in the lives of ethnic activists in Siberia. This relationship can be maintained in different ways: by travelling locally to the places associated with one’s ethnicity (as in Oleg’s case), by making
regular long-distance trips to the original place of birth (as in Gulnur’s case) or by changing one’s place of residence (as intended by Andrei). The three possible strategies, provided by the above-mentioned biographies, often intermingle (especially when it comes to occasional visits “home” and travelling locally), and are well-suited to demonstrate how the change of transportation infrastructure in Siberia in the post-Soviet period has affected ethnic communities in manifold ways.

New home and visual self-presentation

In this section, I seek to demonstrate how the involvement of ethnic activists in the public acts of displaying ethnicity reveals a certain lifestyle dimension. I also show how NCOs allow their members not only to claim cultural distinctiveness from the rest of the population, but also to foster ethnic equality and social inclusion in the new surroundings. As I stated above, non-native ethnic activists in Siberia — the protagonists of this chapter — can be optionally referred to as migrant people (with the proviso that there are those who have just arrived and those settled for years) or as the country’s ethnic minorities, united by their membership in NCOs. The latter perspective shifts our concern from the issues of relating with the original homeland and physical movement back to the subject of ethnic diversity of East Siberia and the problem of maintaining a specific cultural identity there.

Ethno-cultural festivals, held in most Russian cities to demonstrate “unity in diversity” — discussed by Eleanor Peers in the example of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) (Chapter 7 in this volume) — have been seen by many ethnic activists in the Baikal region as a means of reinvigorating and asserting their people’s cultural identity in contrast to other ethnic groups. Geared either towards members of their own ethnic group or towards the by-standing audience of diverse ethnic backgrounds, such festivals have commonly relied on the practices of visual self-presentation, as their participants have used “traditional” ethnic clothes, singing, dancing, or cuisine for the show. While the preparation for the public appearance has been more often than not underpinned by certain patterns of spending and consumption (such as buying the material accoutrements for staging an ethnic performance), a great number of NCO members still agreed to the expenditures, considering
them as either justified or inevitable. Indeed, the investment of time and money on the part of NCO members has been countered by their sense of contribution to the process of ethnic revival and the importance thereof to their own self. By the same token, a great number of ethnic activists are likely to view public occasions as an opportunity to claim their own equality symbolically and derive personal meaning from this process. In this sense, there has always been a certain interplay between people’s aspiration to express their distinctive cultural identity (“sense of difference”) and their attempts to maintain unity and the sense of community with other people (“sense of equality”). Both orientations can be found among the ethnic minority activists in Siberia, underpinning their specific lifestyle as active members of NCOs. At the same time, the relative importance of these two orientations have arguably been not identical for the one who has just arrived and the one who can already be counted as a long-term resident.

Sense of difference: comparing two ethnic festivals

Further, I am going to focus on two festivals — Sabantui and Nooruz (the first being associated by me with long-time residents, and the latter with newcomers) and trace how since the rise of NCOs in Siberia the pursuit of difference through symbolic means has been a part of ethnic activists’ lifestyle. In many ways the Soviet period saw the formation of a specific culture of celebrations, in which ethnicity was to be framed in terms of Soviet nationality politics and as such utilised for the purposes of the state (Rolf 2006). Echoing Don Handelman’s metaphor of “mirrors”, held up by the state to its citizens through the modern spectacle and designed to provide “an incisive vision of themselves as they should be” (1997: 396), I would point here to the typically taxonomic organisation of Soviet festivals, celebrating the communal Soviet identity of ethnically heterogeneous people and frequently referring to the trope of the “friendship of peoples”. Indeed, as described by Peers in Chapter 7, the very logics of the trope made it necessary for the state authorities to foster the spread of such visually expressive genres as national dances, songs, folklore, poetry and many others — familiar to those attending the festival events in the Soviet cities — and by corollary expect their participants to demonstrate something on the stage that would stand
for his or her nationality. As the post-Soviet Russian state inherited much of the Soviet-era experience of dealing with nationality issues, participation in public festivals has become central to the activities of NCOs, while the reproduction of ethnicity for public display has evolved into an important mechanism through which local authorities have provided recognition to cultural organisations in their respective regions.

The establishing of ethnic organisations in Russia at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by a resurgence of interest in “folk tradition” among ethnic activists, who attempted to secure “ethnic revival” in their regions through the reinvention of holidays, seen as moribund in the Soviet era. For example, Sabantui, held annually by the Turkic-speaking population of the Volga region to celebrate the end of the ploughing season, had been particularly associated with Tatar people’s culture in the rest of the country, and as such was seen as almost entirely abandoned by the Tatars in the Soviet era. The rediscovery of the festival and its come-back to the public sphere at the end of the 1980s was seen by local officials and the Tatar activists of the region as the beginning of a Tatar cultural revival. Since a considerable number of Tatars inhabited the rural areas of Ust’-Orda Okrug and, apart from the Russians and Buryats, had their villages scattered across the territory, the first Sabantui celebrations were staged in Ust’-Orda in 1987, attracting an audience from the neighbouring city of Irkutsk and other urban centres. Moreover, this event facilitated the consolidation of the urban Tatar intelligentsia and gave impetus to the establishment of the first Tatar organisation in the city of Irkutsk.

While the return of Sabantui to the public sphere dates back to the end of the 1980s, the staging of Nooruz, yet another festival of the non-native ethnic minorities in Siberia, has had quite a different trajectory, receiving an impulse for development with the influx of economic migrants from the states of Central Asia towards the end of the 1990s. Even though celebrated by a wide range of Iranian and Turkic peoples, my focus here is on the Kyrgyz case (hence its spelling reflects the Kyrgyz word), considering a rising number of Kyrgyz people coming to the region. As with Sabantui, NCOs have served as a facility for those Kyrgyz activists in Siberia who have cared for the cultural distinctiveness of their people.

Bearing a somewhat Soviet-style name, “Druzhba” (“Friendship”) is a Kyrgyz cultural organisation located in Irkutsk. At the time of writing
it normally relied on the help of non-professional staff, combining their cultural and educational initiatives with other more economically rewarding activities on the market. Beishen, in his forties, is one of the organisation’s leaders. He always emphasised to me the importance of Kyrgyz culture in Siberia. From the very start, he saw Druzhba as essentially a cultural organisation. Indeed, Beishen had lived in Irkutsk for more than twenty years after he left Kyrgyzstan at the beginning of the 1980s and made his way to Khabarovsk to study at a police school. After school, he moved to Irkutsk to work as a police officer, and soon grew into a person of authority among his country fellows in the city. Beishen was one of the founders of Druzhba and a regular organiser of Nooruz festival for the Kyrgyz community of Irkutsk.

By the standards of Kyrgyz migrants, Beishen is now a long-time resident, but most of his activities are centred around and for the newcomers. Importantly, while the staging of Sabantui in Irkutsk has relied on the well-established community of Tatar intelligentsia, local entrepreneurs, and state authorities (as well as external support from Tatarstan), the organisation of Nooruz has been dependent on the joint efforts of fewer individuals, including Beishen. Now twenty years after the first public Sabantui was held by the members of the Tatar NCO in Irkutsk Oblast, the festival grew into a highly institutionalised event,
supported by both the local authorities and those of the Republic of Tatarstan and celebrated by the activists from urban and rural locations. This has hardly been the case of Nooruz, as organised by Kyrgyz activists in Irkutsk, who lacked the external support (in contrast to Tatar activists) and who lived mainly within the urban boundaries. I still remember asking Beishen why he was so concerned with staging the festival, on which he had to spend such considerable efforts. The reply was: “I feel responsible for my people, as they come here and start to forget who they are. Somebody has to do it, so this is my choice”.

The sense of difference, encapsulated by Beishen’s words, has been shared by many ethnic minority people, whose own residing away from their ethnic home has led them to join an NCO. To others it has been as important to extend their sensibilities about cultural distinctiveness to the whole ethnic community. It is no surprise, then, that those activists who represent the communities of newcomers also try to reach out to their ethnic fellows arriving in the region. Beishen seems to be that type, as he has claimed responsibility for maintaining Kyrgyz culture under the new circumstances and used Nooruz as an opportunity to reproduce the familiar ethnic surroundings for Kyrgyz people abroad.

The key point here is to what extent and why ethnic activists would rely on expressing their sense of difference in public before the wider audience, rather than organise the celebration in private. The interesting thing about Sabantui is how the social imaginary, associated with this festival in Siberia, impelled local Tatar activists to put considerable efforts into its reconstruction and popularisation among their ethnic fellows as well as the general public. In his book on the “festive state”, David Guss examines the changing meaning and organisation of cultural performance as it is interpreted and claimed by individuals in the service of local, national, and even global interests. He argued that cultural performances can be recognised as sites of social action where identities and relations are being continually reconfigured, new social imaginaries are being produced, which can be in that capacity appropriated by the state (Guss 2000: 12). The organisation of ethnic festivals in Siberia has been closely linked with the discourse of modernisation and development of the region. Reflecting the social imaginary of the region as provincial and economically backward, yet promising in terms of its strategic location and cultural attractiveness,
the public discourse in Buryatia and Irkutsk Oblast aimed at legitimising festival activities, turning them into an important driver of development both through the “active” promotion of tourism, foreign investment, and the “passive” soliciting of funding from the federal budget from Moscow for the organisation of such celebrations.

Still more important, however, is the way in which the festive forms have been used and manipulated to mobilise the local community for collective action. In this sense, aspirations have been prominent among ethnic activists to be “modern” and “global”, but at the same time to refashion their traditions as compatible with “local” conditions. This in turn has motivated ethnic activists — members of NCOs — to adapt their festivals to the gaze of the external audience, including tourists, placing a high priority on the visuality during the expression of ethnic identity through clothing and other accoutrements. While reproduction and stylisation of ethnicity during public festivals — through dress, consumption of ethnic cuisine, and artistic performances — have constituted a part of the lifestyle for many rank-and-file members, their efforts have been underpinned by the cultural brokerage of their leaders attempting to secure public recognition of the festival and its wider proliferation. In a sense, the tendency for the public demonstration of one’s ethnic culture reached its apex through the use of modern technological innovations, including the internet. Thus, due to the efforts of the local Tatar activists, the interested audience could also enjoy watching Sabantui online as it was being held in the suburbs of Ulan-Ude.

In many ways, the workings of this globalising tendency are reminiscent of Aleksandr Pika’s concept of “neotraditionalism”, which in his opinion can well be applied as an alternative to the opposition between the concepts of “ethnic” and “modern” (Pika 1999). As Pika’s research on indigenous small-numbered peoples of Siberia revealed, “the new ‘traditionalism’ does not mean a return to the past. It is a forward-looking development, though one which attends to the specific nature of northern regions and peoples” (1999: 23). Like small-numbered indigenous peoples of the north, activists of the non-indigenous cultural organisations of Siberia do not just gravitate towards a revival of the past, but see their ethnicity as an integral part of the present-day world.

As my evidence suggests, Nooruz, as an ethnic festival organised by the activists of NCOs, has largely remained an event for the
insiders — individuals originating from the Muslim states of Central Asia and Transcaucasia. The relative closedness in holding Nooruz can be explained by its “international” character (no particular ethnic community could claim possession of the festival), but also by the character of the respective communities. First, as most of the newcomers are busy settling in the new place or preparing to leave for their place of origin, most of the festival organisers had to act primarily as “managers” (rather than “cultural brokers”), renegotiating individual roles and duties. Second, even though Nooruz has been well established and widely popular in places inhabited by Muslim groups (including other parts of Russia), its proliferation in the Baikal region has been largely associated with newcomers and as such lacked the required popular support or attention. Despite that, in the light of the same tendency that has propelled the openness of Sabantui, Nooruz is still likely to become a more public and tourist-oriented event in the future.

Sense of equality: recognition in a transnational setting

The staging of public celebrations in the city landscape has been usually underpinned by the rhetoric of interethnic peace and tolerance. Indeed, NCOs have commonly been seen by local authorities as contributing
to the prevention of possible interethnic conflicts, while their leaders have been recognised by the state authorities as contact persons in charge of representing the respective ethnic communities. Importantly, the authorities tried not only to localise the activities of ethnic activists in time and space (the House of People’s Friendship in Ulan-Ude as a network hub and the place where the NCO activists are based is the best example here), but also to impose certain standards as to the outward appearance of the people during festivals. At the same time, as my data suggest, visiting some urban areas, including those assigned for public festivals, is often associated by members of ethnic minorities with a certain danger and the risk of being exposed to mockery or even physical assaults on the part of xenophobic groups. Such anxieties are associated not obligatorily with peripheral and poor neighbourhoods (where xenophobic sentiments among the locals are supposedly stronger), but in some cases, not unreasonably, with central areas; hence why some members of ethnic minorities are wary of visiting such places, let alone demonstrating their ethnicity in a deliberate manner. For this reason, a great number of ethnic festivals (such as Nooruz) are held within a smaller community of insiders, rather than displayed to the wider audience.

Apart from staging a performance before the public, onerous by itself, the involvement in a festival also requires its participants to attend to a number of details, including the securing of the necessary paraphernalia. Indeed, the capacity of ethnic activists to get involved or to organise public festivals has rested on their ability to resolve certain routine difficulties and to tap human and material resources. Thus, the planning of Sabantui or Nooruz, like any other ethnic festival organised by ethnic-minority activists in Siberia, has been not only about getting hold of ethnic paraphernalia, but has also involved a plethora of other pragmatic questions as to who is responsible for what.

My position is that even though those newcomers who are active as members of NCOs could find themselves more vulnerable as possible presenters on the stage, their decision to get involved in the public activities seems to reflect a certain lifestyle dimension, provided they are fully aware of the existing risks and predicaments. The vulnerability of newcomers in turn seems to arise out of their current liminal status, as not yet fully settled in the new region. The liminal position, as Victor
Turner suggests, is often associated with “the members of despised and outlawed ethnic and cultural groups” who “play major roles in myths and popular tales as representatives or expressions of universal-human values” (Turner 1969: 369) such as equal treatment of people regardless of their background. Indeed, the Turnerian reference to “small nations” as upholders of religious and moral values is in good agreement with the state policies in Russia, recruiting members of NCOs for the display of ethnic diversity. At the same time, the imperative of seeing no status difference between ethnic groups or declaring equal opportunities for all the nationalities has imparted such festivals with the spirit of *communitas*. According to Turner, *communitas* as a special “modality of social relationship” is distinct from the “area of common living” as a relatively unstructured formation (Turner 1969: 360). The spirit of *communitas*, as reinforced through the surrounding anonymity and joyful atmosphere, has been shared by both old-time residents and newcomers attending the festival. At the same time, I argue, it is the newcomers who potentially benefit more from this spirit, as it might provide them with a sense of equality and consolidation, of which they usually are in greater need than the permanent inhabitants of the region.

Acquiring a particular lifestyle as ethnic activists, the newly arrived individuals will not only benefit from the interaction with their peers, but will also contribute to the success of the collective enterprise. As my own data demonstrate, activists of ethnic organisations have been largely non-professionals when it comes to the reproducing of “their nationality’s” culture (understood here in the Soviet fashion as a constellation of visually expressive genres). Yet, while the organisations, representing mainly old-time inhabitants, have been in a comparatively advantageous position drawing human resources from the local intelligentsia and highly educated urbanites, most of the newcomers’ organisations (even though commonly having “managers” at their core) have to rely on people from rural areas, who are often manual workers. The lack of personnel qualified in the sphere of cultural production has been to some extent an important mobilising factor, making the organisations’ activists use their social networks to find adequate ethnic fellows who are, speaking literally, able to sing and dance on stage.

At the same time, it would probably not be totally justified to contrast “old-time residents” and “newcomers” in terms of their educational
background and cultural level, since these parameters have considerably varied among individuals. As an example, I sketch out the story of Mirlan, a Kyrgyz man who works as a salesperson on one of the trade markets in Ulan-Ude and became involved in the activities of the local Kyrgyz cultural organisation. Mirlan, 34 years old at the time of writing, was born in a small town near Batken in southern Kyrgyzstan. As a student of the arts college in Batken he was taught music and choreography as well as the Russian language. Mirlan’s career progressed steadily as he was employed at the local university and then promoted to the position of vice principle, responsible for the cultural work of students. Despite his success, he wanted to further improve the material well-being of his family; so when his elder brother, working in Ulan-Ude, offered him a job at the local trade market, he agreed to move to Russia for some period.

Mirlan’s daily routine in Russia came to be focused on his job in the market, where he spent up to six days a week. In addition, his professional qualification as a musician and a performer of the Kyrgyz epic Manas proved an important asset for him, as he was regularly invited to demonstrate his skills on the stage and before the camera. In this way, he not only publicly represented the Kyrgyz nation in Siberia, but also evoked the feeling of respect from his peers in the market. Mirlan was proud to be part of the team of the local Kyrgyz activists and happy to attend the cultural events, yet due to family commitments he had to return to Kyrgyzstan one year after his arrival and give up his cultural activities in Russia.

Mirlan’s case is both unique and typical in a number of ways. It is unique because it was by some serendipity that — as a professional cultural worker moving outside his country for manual work — he found his cultural expertise in demand in his new home, unwittingly validating the understanding of culture as a kind of “toolkit” that migrants take on their journeys (Vertovec 2009). But his case is also rather typical in that his decision to return to his place of origin was determined by the economic strategy of his whole household — a fact that unites him with many other seasonal migrants and temporary residents. In any event, representing the local Kyrgyz community was an important motivation for Mirlan to spare some free time and attend the public festivals in the city, even though he was not permanently
settling in Siberia. The sense of equality and pride, underpinned by a certain elevation of one’s social status, has been an important incentive for those newcomers who would make a choice to go public. True, there have never been too many ethnic activists among newcomers, and Mirlan’s case seems to be one of the few. Yet, even though a great many newcomers are busy with menial jobs, their membership in an NCO — temporary as it might be — would enable them to do what they think their life “should” involve (rather what they actually do), carving out a particular lifestyle during their stay.

Before his departure, Mirlan featured as a character in a movie about the Kyrgyz community in Siberia, shot by the local television station, and performed Manas before the camera. As he was unable to watch the movie on television, he asked me to secure a DVD copy for him that he could bring home as a memory. In this respect, the case of Mirlan is also indicative of the specific role of visual self-presentation for the lifestyle of ethnic activists and the particular emphasis on “surfaces” — to use the term by Chaney — in their activities (Chaney 1996: 99; cf. Chapter 1 in this volume).

The practice of collecting photos and videos of one’s performances during the festivals has been common both among the long-timers and newcomers. The collected audio and video material may be used as evidence of one’s personal involvement or as part of the organisation’s official portfolio. In the latter case, most of the information has been either stored on data storage devices to be presented on special occasions or uploaded online for public display. In recent years, with the spread of the internet in Siberia an increasing number of NCOs came to set up their accounts on social networking sites (such as the Russian VKontakte) or their own websites, not only serving as a profile of the organisation, but also containing abundant visual information on the past activities of its members. Needless to say, the presented materials have not only been meant for internal consumption, but also to produce a positive image of the organisation for the general public.

Most ethnic activists have largely perceived visual self-presentation as part of their mission to sell “their” cultural heritage to outsiders. Thus, the regular involvement of ethnic activists in the festivals has not only presented them with an opportunity to recruit new members among their ethnic fellows, but also to claim a “superior” position among their peers, especially when it came to the public contest for the “best” NCO.
While the spirit of *communitas* during the festival has in general made possible informal contacts among the performers and the audience, a good self-presentation may secure ethnic activists the required patronage among local decision-makers or enable them to produce some income out of small-scale commercial activities and trading with some of their hand-made goods, such as food or craft items. In summary, all these formal and informal activities during the public events serve as a means not only of claiming cultural distinctiveness, but also of accentuating the sense of equality and reinforcing self-consolidation among the members of the group.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to demonstrate how the complex changes in post-Soviet Russia have affected the inhabitants of East Siberia, facilitating or reversely limiting their opportunities for maintaining and expressing their ethnic affiliations. Focusing particularly on the activists of ethnicity-based organisations (“national-cultural organisations”), my overall contention has been that membership in NCOs constitutes a specific lifestyle in its own right. But then what can the particular case of ethnic activists in Siberia tell us about the character of lifestyle as a concept?

First and foremost, as the available material suggests, most of the members of NCOs desire to express their ethnic belonging, even though it involves considerable effort, time, and expense on their part. In this sense, the degree of people’s involvement and their commitment to the cause of the organisation can be considered as a certain marker of “lifestyle”. It is not my intention to downplay the importance of “subscribers” and “adherents”, yet their input to the functioning of NCOs seems to be less significant as compared to those of “activists”. Indeed, in most of cases, it is NCO “activists” who not only take on the overall responsibility, but also derive personal meaning from their contribution and connect the progress of their mission with their own self. The theme of coming to terms with certain difficulties or overcoming the existing disparities has been dominant among the members of NCOs and as such has been common to both “long-term residents” and “newcomers”, sharing common ethnic sensibilities. At
the same time, I have shown that the capacity of different individuals to pursue a specific lifestyle as an NCO activist is conditional upon a great number of factors, including their economic circumstances, gender status, and geographic location. “Lifestyle” is viewed here as a specific phenomenon that cross-cuts social classes, rather than being confined to the more prosperous middle class (Bourdieu 1984).

The second conclusion of this chapter has to do with the role of choice in maintaining a particular lifestyle. Depending on our perspective, we might define “lifestyle” either as a flexible phenomenon, providing individuals with a certain leeway, or as a rigid formation, with little or no variation in terms of practice. Drawing from my research on NCOs, I would adhere to the former view, as the issue of relating with the original home, integral to the lifestyle of ethnic activists in Siberia, has been based on a number of options among which they could choose. As I pointed out earlier, the range of possible options for those individuals staying away from home and feeling nostalgic has varied from physical contacts with one’s place of origin (through occasional visits home or repatriation) to the symbolic renegotiation of home (in some cases including local travel). In this sense, NCOs have served as a facility to reach out to the country of origin or conversely as a condition of staying away from home. The relative importance of these options, or models, is different for those non-native activists whom I have designated as “long-term residents” versus “newcomers”.

Clearly enough, repatriation as a distinct model of relating with the original home has been an option for those inhabitants of Siberia who were born or spent most of their lives there. However, even though NCOs have in general assisted their members in reuniting with their ethnic home, repatriation has been quite a radical option and as such been mainly suitable to the younger generation of activists. The more moderate option — occasional trips home — has mostly been chosen by the middle-aged generation of locally settled activists, with their NCOs funding such trips. Finally, the third model of relating with home is based on symbolic (rather than physical) movement as the activists could renegotiate “home” locally by visiting certain localities associated with their ethnic community, or by emphasising their cultural distinctiveness. Even though this model has been universally shared by both the long-term residents and newcomers, for the former it often
meant being settled unilocally in Siberia while for the latter it implied leading a translocal life between the country of origin and country of current stay.

Recapitulating the workings of social imaginary on different groups of the population, I would contrast old-timers and newcomers, as the former could presumably imagine their original home in a more idealised vein (looking to the past for positive memories), while the latter’s experience of it might conversely be more matter-of-fact and even dramatic (hence their decision to leave their country of origin).

The third conclusion about the nature of lifestyles as presented in this chapter, is concerned with the degree and importance of their outer expression, or what Chaney referred to as “surfaces” (Chaney 1996: 99). Several theoretical questions are raised here: how many individuals at minimum should be around to constitute a distinct “lifestyle”?

do these individuals tend to form close-knit communities or rather loose collectivities?

and what is the role of the external audience and its potential feedback towards the observed practices? The data from across the volume show that the size of the collective can vary from a number of disparate individuals with their own peculiar ways (see Chapter 3 in this volume) to a virtually countless number of people in proportion to the whole population (see Chapter 7). Perhaps, my own research case represents a middle ground, as activists of NCOs have never been too many among the inhabitants of Siberia. Rather, activists’ affiliation with particular organisations and by virtue of this with particular ethnic communities has made their lifestyle mediated by their belonging to a finite number of “groups” within the urban area. This in turn has necessitated a greater emphasis for their part on “surfaces” as a way to distinguish one group from another, thereby intensifying a sense of difference which culminates during ethnic festivals (e.g. it would almost surely be an offence to confuse a person’s ethnicity, as he or she is wearing ethnic dress during the festival). As I pointed out, the pursuit of difference has been more characteristic of long-term residents, concerned with their cultural distinctiveness and less of an issue for the newcomers.

Concerning another theoretical issue — the interrelation of a lifestyle group and the outsiders — the available material attests to the existence of relatively self-reliant and semi-closed groups (see Chapters 9 and
These groups also emphasise the visual aspects of their practices, but with less focus on the external audience. By contrast, members of NCOs are not only commonly expected to demonstrate their cultural specificity during public events, but mostly perceive it as part of their mission to “sell” it to outsiders. The ethnic activists’ emphasis on “surfaces” serves to consolidate the members of the group while also accentuating their sense of equality with other ethnic groups. In this respect, it is the newcomers (rather than long-term residents) who usually seek to establish themselves as equals at their new place of residence or use NCOs as a facility to foster their social inclusion in the new surroundings.

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