

# The Phenomenon of Internal Diasporas in Russia: The Case of the Mari<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** By examining theoretical definitions as well as empirical observations, the argument is developed that the phenomenon of diaspora does not necessarily involve an international dimension. In the Russian Federation an example of this is provided by those members of non-Russian nationalities who have within the federation a titular autonomous unit but who live outside it. In this paper, I attempt to typologize possible trajectories of identity development in major Mari diaspora communities. Evidently, variations of integration and assimilation constitute the most widespread identity options facing them.

## Diaspora: international and intra-state dimensions

Among nationality issues of the post-Soviet space, the problems of diasporas have become an object of overriding concern. Moreover, it is quite natural that by virtue of their large size and political weight, Russian diaspora groups have captured the most attention devoted to the issue in public. Indeed, the change in the status of those Russians who happened to be residents of the non-Russian republics during the collapse of the Soviet Union has been drastic: A group of over twenty million people representing the empire-bearing nationality, formerly privileged by their political and cultural dominance, were transformed overnight into minorities of uncertain status, scattered over a number of newly independent states. However, for a large number of other nationalities of the former Soviet Union, including those autochthonous to Russia, the issue of diaspora is also an important one. Besides this one can argue that the question also existed before the demise of the Soviet system.

The notion of diaspora is by no means a clear-cut one. Not infrequently, it is difficult to discern a diaspora from a group of migrants, an ethnoreligious group,

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or even from an ethnic minority. This is certainly connected with an enormous broadening of the concept; while in the past the notion of diaspora was practically exclusively reserved for the Jews and Jewish communities dispersed outside Palestine or Israel, at the present time the term has won a much wider usage (The New Encyclopedia 1990: 68). In practice it may be applied to any ethnic group which lives separately from the main body of its coethnics. Such a diffuse understanding of diaspora has become quite usual also in the Russian press and scholarly parlance.

In a conference devoted to diasporas in international politics a working definition was formulated according to which a diaspora is “a minority ethnic group of migrant origin in a host country which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin” (Landau 1986: 75; Esman 1986: 333). It seems that the above definition can serve as a point of departure for the purposes of this paper as well. In connection with the definition, at least three points should be made. First, it implies that an investigator of the phenomenon of diaspora needs to take into consideration the triadic nexus of relations existing between the host state, the diaspora, and the diaspora’s external homeland. Second, as a corollary, the issue of diaspora has an aspect belonging to the sphere of international relations. The third point, made explicit in the definition, is that the circumstances behind the formation of a diaspora necessarily involve population migration.

In accordance with the above view, a diaspora group, residing beyond the boundaries of the respective nation state, can be seen as one of the participants in a play with three actors, each representing different national aspirations. As Rogers Brubaker (1996: 4-6) has delineated them, the first one is the “nationalising” nationalism of the dominant group in the host country where the minority lives. As a rule, this nationalism strives to strengthen the cultural, demographic, and economic positions of the core nation. Furthermore, it is often conceived that as a state-bearing group the core nation has certain “primogeniture” rights in the polity. On the other hand, there often exists transborder nationalism in the external homeland of the diaspora. It is typical of this homeland nationalism that the rights of co-nationals in other states are monitored and their activities promoted. It is no surprise then, that controversy very easily arises between these two nationalisms; not so rarely homeland nationalists’ activities are perceived by the elites in the diaspora’s host country as interference in their internal matters. The third actor, the diaspora, finds itself between these opposing nationalisms. Moreover, it also may have a nationalism of its own: The leaders of the community often put forward claims about one or another form of autonomy and call for measures that would keep the real or perceived processes of denationalisation in check. Even though an opposition to the “nationalising” nationalism of the host country represents a common feature for the nationalist pursuits of the diaspora and its homeland country, it does not,

however, guarantee the existence of harmonious relations between the two latter nationalisms.

The above train of thought requires the presence of an international boundary. However, there are grounds to argue that relations, which are in many aspects similar to those discussed in connection with “genuine” diaspora groups, may also be produced by internal boundaries, i.e., all three actors of the drama are found within one and the same state. In regard to the Russian Federation of the late 1990s, one can note that the internal administrative demarcations of Soviet Russia have remained intact and the legacy of the Soviet period of managing nationality issues lives on. It is therefore quite in order to take a brief look at the territorialisation of nationality carried out by the Bolsheviks.

While the Soviet Union as a whole was not a nation-state, on the sub-state level, on the level of those constituent parts which were defined in ethnic terms, an allowance was made which fused together territory and national culture. Thus, during the early years of Soviet rule dozens of ethnically defined sub-state jurisdictions of varying hierarchical rank were set up with the obvious aim that each should provide for the respective group a sort of territorial focus where institutional support of ethnic culture would be concentrated. At the top rung of the ladder were the union republics, semi nation-states with a number of formal symbols of statehood. No wonder that the nationalities endowed with a union republic began to consider it an ethnic homeland. This process, however, was not limited to the titular nationalities of the union republics only. Something similar also happened with the groups having autonomous republics in Soviet Russia. For some of the groups, at least, it became common to view the titular autonomous republic as an embryonic homeland. To be sure, the autonomies did not possess any sovereign rights and even their self-rule remained largely fictional. However, what was important was the constant institutional framework which, despite all of the shifts in nationalities policy, made possible the training of national cadres and the development of languages and cultures (Brubaker 1996: 28-40; Tolz 1998: 279).

Whatever the genuine intentions of the architects of early Soviet nationalities policy, the scope of the establishment of autonomous units was impressive. Even many of the small groups of the Russian interior, which had shown no or very little aspiration towards self-rule, were endowed with an autonomous territory of one or another rung. Accordingly, the Bolshevik-sponsored nation building project for the non-Russians, with the concomitant territorialisation of ethnicity at the sub-state level, contributed to the crystallisation among Soviet nationalities of a more distinctly perceived image of their respective homelands (Schwartz 1990: 127-29). The logic of the policy also envisaged that institutions of ethnic cultural support would to a high degree be concentrated in the newly established autonomies. For most peoples of Russia this meant that an array of completely new institutions—research and educational establishments,

theatres, publishing houses, newspapers, etc.–was created in the autonomies. Moreover, most of those existing bodies of ethnic culture that had functioned in centres outside of the core territory were gradually collected in the autonomous units. Under these circumstances it was quite natural that the authorities of the autonomies also assumed the role of ethnic patron in regard to the cultural and educational needs of their coethnics residing beyond the boundaries of the autonomous unit. Even if this role was a diffuse one, relations resembling those between homeland and diaspora began to develop.

The top level among autonomous jurisdictions of the Russian republic, representing a form of nominal statehood, was that of an autonomous republic. Due to ethnically mixed settlement patterns, it was no simple task to draw the boundaries of the republics. Moreover, incidences of gerrymandering the frontiers are also obvious. As a result, the facts of ethnography did not correspond to administrative boundaries. This meant that from the very beginning all Russian republics were – as they also continue to be – ethnically heterogeneous and in several of them Russians constitute the largest population group. The strong Russian presence, and the extraterritorial cultural autonomy they in fact enjoyed everywhere, was among the reasons why there was not much leeway left for the republican titular elites to take steps which would have upgraded the positions of the republics to that of more genuine statehood.

Still, even symbolic and ceremonial state institutions may turn out important for the emergence of national sentiments and the emotional attachment to homeland. Furthermore, under the rubric of *korenizatsiia* (indigenisation), personnel policies favouring non-Russian nationalities were pursued with considerable vigour in the 1920s, and in the fields of native-language education and national culture many minority groups made great progress. Even when these ethnic cultural activities ran into difficulties by the mid-1930s, the foundation laid earlier in the autonomous republics nevertheless provided a certain ethnic shelter. The mere continued existence of cultural and educational institutions meant that in areas connected with humanitarian scholarship and education the titular nationality was strongly represented and usually held a number of key posts in this sphere.

In a situation when the overlap between the core nation and the total population remains far from complete, the nation builders face the delicate task of relating these two bodies of population to each other so that the whole population will feel loyal and identify with the state. Some leaders of Soviet successor states have tried to get around the dilemma by evading a clear choice between ethnic and civic nation. This becomes obvious, for instance, from Nursultan Nasarbaev's statement that Kazakhstan is simultaneously both a multinational society and also an ethnic homeland for the Kazakhs (Kolstø 1998: 52, 56). In the wake of *perestroika* and the parade of republican declarations of sovereignty,

which gained momentum in 1989-1990, the nature of autonomous formations became an issue of public dispute in Russia as well.

Since the Russian republics are in their ethnic makeup highly heterogeneous, there has been no serious question of turning them into national states in an ethnocultural sense, with the obvious exception of Chechnia. At the same time several republics have strived to put some distance between themselves and the federal centre and to promote nation building projects for the titular nationality. The most outstanding example is obviously Tatarstan. For some time in the surging years of the early 1990s, the republican leadership seems to have hovered between the choice of ethnic and civic nation, even trying to reconcile the two concepts. Indicative of the waning influence of the Tatar nationalist opposition is the fact that while in the republican declaration of state sovereignty of 1990 the right of the Tatar nation to self-determination was made explicit; in Tatarstan's constitution of 1992 the Tatar nation was replaced by the "multinational people" of the republic (Iskhakov 1997: 110-12, 127-28). Even if the euphoria connected with the republican declarations of sovereignty has dissipated, attempts to further the culture of the titular nationality continue, often within a framework which could be called state nationalism. In local Russian nationalist circles this has given reason to express concern over the prospect of ethnic discrimination: Should the leading titular elites "fill up" their territory with the national culture, the extra-territorial cultural rights enjoyed by Russians would become jeopardised in the longer run. Accordingly, the policies of republican leaders and their agendas of nationalising activities may be perceived by inhabitants of the non-titular nationality as efforts towards the legitimisation of the core nationality as the "owner" of the republic (Brubaker 1996: 5, 40).

Thus, developments since the mid-1980s are largely responsible for the circumstance that diaspora status in Russia has acquired a clearer political configuration. Therefore the use of the term "diaspora" also seems acceptable in the intra-Russian context. In the Russian Federation the problem is clearly of enormous scope: About eight million out of those twenty million non-Russians that have a titular autonomous unit in the federation live outside that unit. However, one has to admit here that this understanding of diaspora makes it necessary to stretch the precepts of the earlier definition because not all communities identified as diasporas have come into being through migration. Strictly speaking this means that the communities named here as diasporas are such in a somewhat figurative sense. For this reason one could also use the notion of "quasi-diaspora." One more reservation concerns the triadic nexus of relations between the diaspora, the homeland and the host country. Under Russian circumstances it is necessary to add a fourth pole, the federal centre, into the scheme.

## The Mari and their diaspora

Together with the Mordvins, the Mari form the Volgaic branch of the Finno-Ugrian linguistic family. The Mari were also known as the Cheremis but this latter name has fallen into disuse. Since the Middle Ages the Mari's ethnocultural contacts have been basically with the neighbouring Turkic peoples and later on also with the Eastern Slavs, who began to invade the Volga region in the final centuries of the Middle Ages. For the Mari, who belonged to the realm of the Kazan' Khanate, the year 1552 marked a historical turning point: The defeat of Kazan' brought the entire Middle Volga region, including the territories of Mari inhabitation, under Muscovite rule. This subjection took place painfully: The Mari area encompassed pockets of the most tenacious resistance in the Volga valley and a series of uprisings, known as the Cheremis Wars, erupted during the second half of the sixteenth century (Kappeler 1982: 87-94; Ivanov and Sanukov 1998: 21-23). However, militarily and politically the Mari soon had to yield to superior numbers and with the dissemination of the Orthodox faith, which was greatly intensified in the eighteenth century, Russian cultural influence grew enormously.

In the administrative system of the Russian Empire the Mari homeland in the Middle Volga region was divided between the Kazan', Viatka, and Nizhnii Novgorod provinces. Right from the beginning of Soviet rule, the situation changed with the establishment of the Mari autonomous province in 1920. In conjunction with the Soviet constitutional reform of 1936, the province was elevated to the status of an autonomous republic. Since 1992 the Mari autonomous region bears the name of the Republic of Marii El.

The Mari Republic belongs to those poor agricultural regions heavily dependent on subsidies from the federal centre. At the beginning of 1997 the republic had a population of 766,000. According to 1989 data, the shares of the two main nationalities in the republic, the Russians and the Mari, were nearly balanced, at 47.5 and 43.3 percent respectively. In third place are the Tatars with their 5.9 percent population share (Itogi 1989: Table 4). While the Mari still continue to be an overwhelmingly rural nationality, most of the local Russians are urban residents – a circumstance which cannot be without certain repercussions on educational levels and the division of labour between the chief ethnic groups. Together with tough historical experience this has adversely affected ethnic self-consciousness: Like the other Finno-Ugrian groups in Russia the Mari have been yielding to assimilatory pressures.

The Mari are widely dispersed also outside their titular republic. In 1989, the boundaries of the republic embraced 324,000 Mari, which is not more than about half of the total of 671,000 for the whole nationality in the former Soviet Union. In Russia, the Mari total was 644,000 (Itogi 1989: Tables 2-4). Over the decades of the Soviet period, the percentage of Mari living in the titular repub-

lic showed a tendency to decline. However, at the same time it has to be admitted that a really vast majority of the nationality has never lived within the boundaries of the autonomous region. In 1926, for instance, 57.9 percent of all Mari resided in the Mari autonomous province (Vsesoiuznaia 1926a: Table 9; Vsesoiuznaia 1926b: 12).

The circumstance that every second Mari lives beyond the borders of the Mari Republic stems obviously to some extent from administrative gerrymandering in the years when the boundaries of the autonomy were drawn. A much more significant factor, however, has been migration. Moreover, this was a factor hundreds of years before Soviet rule. Thus, population movements triggered by the Russian conquest of the Mari homeland laid the foundations for the most outstanding part of the Mari diaspora, the Eastern Mari, the groups of which are scattered throughout the territories of the present republics of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Udmurtia, as well as in Perm' and Sverdlovsk provinces. The current composite number of Eastern Mari exceeds 150,000, and about two thirds of these are found in Bashkortostan. In Kirov and Nizhnii Novgorod provinces, which both border on the Mari Republic, there are some 50,000 Mari (Itogi 1989: Table 4). In contrast to the Eastern Mari, whose communities came into being as a result of historically traceable migration, Mari settlement areas in the territory of today's Kirov and Nizhnii Novgorod provinces have existed from time immemorial. In a strict sense then, the populations of the rural Mari communities of these two provinces do not fit the notion of diaspora. Nevertheless, the basic issues of identity development they face are in many respects similar to those observed among more genuine diaspora groups. Therefore it seems permissible to stretch the concept somewhat in regard to the Mari of the two aforementioned provinces.

One can distinguish three major periods during which the territorial dispersal of the Mari particularly grew. The first one extends from the middle of the sixteenth till the middle of the eighteenth century. While the Kama basin served as a sort of advanced base for Russian expansion to Siberia during this period, it also attracted influxes of peasants from the Russian north and interior, including representatives of non-Russian groups. The Mari were also drawn into the eastward population flow. A large part of these were refugees escaping land seizures, coercive baptisms, and the horrors of war and violence visited upon the Middle Volga region. However, there were among the Mari migrants also people recruited by the Russian military for the fortification and custodianship of the frontiers of the state. Whatever the motives, these population movements laid the foundations for the formation of Mari communities east of the original Mari ethnic homeland. By the middle of the eighteenth century this had resulted in the shaping of the basic contours of Eastern Mari settlement areas (Sepeeov 1975: 21-45; Lallukka 1990: 120-21).

Accordingly, there is no doubt about the migratory origins of the Eastern Mari, even though this historic migration has become rather vaguely embedded in the collective consciousness of many of their subgroups—a circumstance obviously connected with the absence of literate layers during the great trek. In this connection a caveat is in order concerning the nature of Mari eastward population flow, often labelled entirely as a forced migration. Certainly, there is no denying that significant groups of Mari were escaping terror and persecutions. However, especially when the political reconfiguration in the Middle Volga had been established, many also moved by choice simply in search of better economic opportunities. Therefore the notion of forced migration does not give a true characterisation of the whole Mari relocation.

In the decades prior to the revolution, Russian authorities set an explicit target to direct peasant settlers from the central regions to the east. This idea was prominent in the agrarian reforms launched by the government of Petr Stolypin. It contributed to some intensification of Mari out-migration from the Middle Volga area. Thus, one can speak of a second wave of migration. However, it appears that in the case of the Mari the wave was not large (Istoriia Mariiskoi ASSR 1986: 231).

Much more important have been the population relocations of the third waves – the Soviet period – in particular those which have occurred since the 1950s. For a general background it is proper to note that the Volga-Viatka macroeconomic region, of which the Mari Republic forms a part, has experienced heavy population losses throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The Volga-Viatka has been a loser in migration exchange with practically all other regions. Especially with the Urals region, the balance of migration has been negative (Moskvin 1991: 73-75). Basically the same holds true also for the Mari Republic. Over the period of severest population outflow, which occurred in the late 1950s and the 1960s, the net migration deficit of the republic reached about 100,000 people (Lallukka 1990: 267). Losses also continued later on, but their scale was much smaller in the 1970s and 1980s. It is true that not all those who left the republic were Mari by nationality. However, their number must have been substantial.

Indeed, a comparison of growth rates in the number of Mari living in the titular republic and outside it shows a remarkable enlargement of the diaspora section of the nationality. Accordingly, in the thirty-year period since 1959, the Mari population beyond the borders of the republic grew by 53.2 percent, whereas the respective figure in the republic was not more than 16.1 percent. By and large, an examination of the growth rates of individual regions discloses that the highest rates are found in the Urals, Western Siberia, and Kazakhstan and in some other far-off regions. This must be connected with the fact that large numbers of Mari participated in such union-wide campaigns as, for instance, the virgin land project of Kazakhstan. No wonder then, that the geographic dispersal of the nationality increased greatly.

Before World War II practically all Mari were rural residents, in both the titular autonomous region and outside it. By 1959 there was no very big change in this situation; 89.0 and 83.0 percent of the Mari respectively in the titular republic and outside it were rural inhabitants. During the next 30 years, the downturn of rural percentages was more marked and in 1989 the figures were 63.2 percent for the Mari of the republic and 53.8 percent for the diaspora. The above figures show that the diaspora section of Mari is somewhat more urbanised than the core group in the republic. Furthermore, the gap in this respect has grown over time.

The Ural Mari, who represent the easternmost group of the Eastern Mari, provide an illustrative example of the fragmentation of diaspora resulting from urbanisation and population movements. The foundation of the Ural Mari community is formed by about thirty villages located in loose clusters on the western foothills of the Urals in Sverdlovsk and Perm' provinces. In the first decades of Soviet rule, the villages represented practically the entire Ural Mari community; there were almost no Mari in cities and towns of the region. At the present time over half of the 38,000 Mari in the two provinces are urban dwellers. Moreover, most of them live far from the rural core of the Ural Mari community in big industrial centres such as Ekaterinburg, Perm', Nizhnii Tagil, and Pervoural'sk. In fact many of the Mari residents of the cities have no ties with the rural core of the Ural Mari since they do not originate from the Urals but from other areas of Mari inhabitation, for instance, from the Mari Republic. Fragmentation of diaspora has also taken place in the countryside of the two provinces: Many residents of Ural Mari villages have moved to villages outside the districts where Mari settlements are found. The dispersal has thus also grown in the countryside. At present the number of Mari in the original village communities does not exceed 15,000 people (Lallukka 2000: 86-90). The whole community has thus changed due to population movements. While some decades ago practically all Ural Mari were members of village communities, at the present time the label of Ural Mari includes groups of varying types and interests, and even geographically scattered individuals who may have very little to do with each other.

## The contacts between the diaspora and the ethnic core

With reference to the tsarist period, the question of the existence of links between the Eastern Mari and the ethnic core on the Middle Volga is difficult to address. However, it seems that once the new influxes of settlers to the Eastern Mari communities from outside dried up, the ties could not be very strong. At the latest such reinforcements ceased during the second half of the eighteenth century. Still, it is clear that there remained in the memory of the people an

awareness of the existence of distant groups of kinsfolk. Furthermore, there are some pieces of evidence of intra-Mari communication over long distances as well. This happened often in connection with large sacrificial gatherings which assembled people from several provinces (Werth 1996: 196-97; Ivanov and Sanukov 1998: 77-78). It is also remarkable that in the final decades of the tsarist period, teacher training institutions established by missionaries in order to bring the non-Russians into the bosom of Russian Orthodoxy collected representatives of various territorial Mari groups together and thus contributed to intra-ethnic communication. This is also a factor which facilitated the organisation of the congresses of the Mari people, with representatives of the basic territorial groups, quite rapidly after the collapse of tsarist rule.<sup>2</sup>

Stimulated by the Bolshevik-sponsored policy of *korenizatsiia*, ethnic cultural support advanced in the first years of Soviet rule. In regard to the Mari, one of the main achievements was that the network of national schools became denser. This happened not only within the newly established autonomous province but also in the main areas of Mari diaspora. At the same time higher institutions connected with the national culture became to a large degree concentrated in the titular autonomy. This implied that in matters of education and culture, a role of a diaspora's ethnic patron devolved upon the Mari autonomous province. This also meant that personal links between representatives of the diaspora and the core group intensified. Members of the diaspora went to study in the newly established Mari capital, Krasnokokshaisk (since 1927 the city has been known as Ioshkar-Ola). Simultaneously there was also a movement in the opposite direction: Teachers were sent out for work in diaspora schools, groups of guest artists visited the diaspora communities, and a flow of native-language publications commenced.

It is hard to assess quantitatively the development of the contacts during the Soviet period. By and large, it appears that when the Soviet nationalities policy turned to a direction less favourable for minorities, as in connection to Khrushchev's school reforms, this also tended to affect the ethnic core's relations with the diaspora groups. In fact, there is some evidence from the Urals of the 1960s and 1970s of a lukewarm, if not resistant, attitude on the part of many district-level administrators towards arrangements that would bring troupes of performing artists from Ioshkar-Ola to Ural Mari villages.<sup>3</sup>

In a survey carried out in fourteen Ural Mari villages in 1998, a number of questions were connected with the links between the Ural Mari and the

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<sup>2</sup> About the congresses organised in 1917-20 see, for example, Kulikov (1993: 44-47) and Sanukov (1994: 42-50).

<sup>3</sup> The author's personal communication during an expedition to Ural Mari villages in 1998. For more about the fieldwork, visit the website at <<http://www.rusin.fi/eastmari/eng/umexped.htm>>.

Mari Republic. Before sifting through the results, it is important to note that from the point of view of the titular republic, the Ural Mari represent the most remote of the major Eastern Mari diaspora groups. As the crow flies, the distance is about 500 miles. Compared with other groups, the Ural Mari are obviously the most isolated. It is also necessary to note that the data pertains to village communities, which certainly present the least mobile section of the Ural Mari.<sup>4</sup>

Informal discussions and visual impressions obtained during visits to Mari diaspora communities suggest that the existence of a titular state formation of the Mari people, even if a long way off, is perceived by many influential members of the diaspora as a matter deserving considerable reverence. Thus, in public buildings of Ural Mari villages, most often in schools and houses of culture, one quite frequently comes across symbols connected with Mari statehood. It is not unusual, for instance, that a school has the map of the Mari Republic painted right on the wall of the entrance hall. Not astonishingly, it is also quite common that the Mari of the titular republic, and the republic itself, are conceived by the Ural Mari as the bearers of the nationality's high culture. Therefore, for many members of the Ural Mari community, the titular republic represents an object of pride, though, perhaps, perceived in a somewhat diffuse or subliminal manner.

Not all Ural Mari, however, have personal, first-hand experience of the Mari Republic. It turned out that 32.0 percent of the respondents to the 1998 survey had visited the republic at some time. The share of relatively recent visitors, or those who had been there during the last ten years, was 14.9 percent. Contacts with the republic can also be considered by educational attainment groups. As one would expect, the more educated a person, the more likely he or she is mobile and has visited the titular republic at some time. Accordingly, in the group with nine years or less of schooling, 18.7 percent had been in the Mari Republic; in the group with 10 to 11 years of schooling the figure was 32.8 percent; and among people whose level of education was 12 years or more, the figure was 45.6 percent.

Those having visited the republic were also asked why they went there. Most commonly they had visited relatives. Over a third (37.9 percent) referred to this motive. In second place with 18.1 percent were those who had paid a visit to their friends. After that followed such reasons as work, amateur artist group visits, and the pursuit of studies – each with a share of about 10 percent.

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure, there were among the respondents also some urban residents who were visiting the villages at the same time when the survey was carried out. The interviewed people were 16 years of age and over. About the survey see <<http://www.rusin.fi/eastmari/home.htm>>.

TABLE 1. Subscription to periodicals published in the Mari language by educational attainment: Ural Mari villagers, in percent (according to the 1998 survey)

Years of schooling completed	Former or current subscriber	Current subscriber	Absolute number of respondents
0 to 9 years	57.5	11.7	120
10 to 11 years	38.7	8.9	124
12 years and more	44.2	13.3	113
Total	46.8	11.2	357

Since the closure of the Mari-language paper *Sotsializm korno*, which existed in Sverdlovsk province in the 1930s, the Ural Mari have not had any periodical publications of their own. Under these circumstances subscribing to a Mari-language periodical means not only a choice in favour of the ethnic native language but also a certain link with the titular republic and a flow of information from there.<sup>5</sup> As Table 1 shows, nearly half (46.8 percent) of the respondents said that a member of his or her family had subscribed at some time to one or more periodicals in Mari. However, from the next column in the table it becomes clear that not more than 11.2 percent indicated that the Mari-language newspapers or journals were being received at the moment of the survey. The basic reason behind the low percentage is the economic crisis. The circulation of these publications has collapsed from what it used to be in the Soviet period because people simply cannot afford to subscribe. However, it is also true that reading skills in Mari have gone down. Inasmuch as the Mari language has to a large extent been phased out from the curriculum of the schools of Ural Mari villages since the 1950s, a situation has developed in which the Mari literary language is commanded best by those who went to school in the 1950s and earlier. However, the ranks of this group are thinning. One should also note that the people with stronger Mari reading skills have, as a rule, completed less schooling than the members of the younger generations. This circumstance explains why the table shows that people with lower levels of education are more apt to be subscribers. This becomes most visible in the column representing the former and current subscribers together: The highest figure (57.5 percent) belongs to respondents with the least schooling.

Considering the long distance, relative isolation, and rural nature of the examined communities, it is hard to judge whether the percentages of individuals having paid a visit to the titular republic of their nationality should be inter-

<sup>5</sup> Besides the Mari Republic, periodicals in Mari (three newspapers with rather small circulation) also exist in Bashkortostan. However, not more than six of the respondents of the 1998 survey subscribed to a paper (*Cholman*) from Bashkortostan. All other Mari-language periodicals came from the Mari Republic.

preted as large or small. At the same time it seems clear enough on the basis of Table 1 that the role of the press as a means of communication between the Ural Mari and the republic is not very essential at the present time. Moreover, it has experienced a clear decline in the post-Soviet years. One link which seems to be doing better is theatre, as visits of groups of actors from the Mari Republic commonly occur during the summer. This form of communication has the big advantage that it does not require Mari literacy. To be certain, the current economic depression has affected these guest performances as well; they are not happening as regularly as earlier. In any case, this type of communication remains the one with by far the widest coverage. According to the 1989 survey, 64.4 percent of the respondents had been spectators of guest performances in the last three years. Plays and other performances by guest artists are very popular and are anticipated by the villagers. It seems that guest performances are important because they reach so many Ural Mari and simultaneously also offer them images from outside to contemplate in terms of their ethnicity and the niche they occupy as the members of the whole Mari people.

## The post-Soviet Mari Republic's response to the diaspora issue

As a part of ethnic mobilisation around the turn of the 1990s, many peoples of Russia rediscovered their diaspora. This resulted in the growth of publications of both journalistic and scholarly nature on the topic. Among the more active nationalities, such as the Tatars, schemes were devised on how the issue should be handled. Due to Tatar radicalism and the magnitude of their diaspora, these schemes were often far-reaching in substance and involved many regions. In the most turbulent years, at least, this was also a source of concern for the federal managers of nationalities policy; Tatar nationalists and even the republic were blamed for interfering in the internal matters of other parts of the federation. This crops up in the claim by Valerii Tishkov, federal minister of nationalities affairs in the early 1990s, that the agreement between Tatarstan and Moscow should include a clause which would minimize Tatarstani interference in the matters of the Tatar diaspora (Iskhakov 1997: 104, 196-98). Instead of an all-Tatar consolidation, Moscow preferred policies directed at the strengthening of local diasporic identities. This gave the Tatars, or at any rate, the Kazan' Tatars, grounds to accuse the centre of pursuing "divide and rule" policies.

Because of the lesser developed ethnic consciousness of the Mari and a more acute lack of financial resources, the Mari Republic has adopted diaspora policies that are more low-key than Tatarstan's. Yet the question still exists. The republic's official approach to the question is fixed in the "Outline of state na-

ationalities policy in the Republic of Marii El” adopted in 1997. There are two main points in the document addressing the question of diaspora. The essence of the first one is “the assistance for the cultural development of the Mari living outside the republic in conformity with the principles of national-cultural autonomy” (Natsional’nye otnosheniia 1997: 78). This prescription is directly linked with the federal law on national-cultural autonomy passed a year earlier. The second point indicates that both state and social organisations shall offer assistance “to the ethnic diasporas of the Mari and the other peoples of the republic in order to meet their national-cultural needs on the basis of agreements contracted between the Republic of Marii El and subjects of the Russian Federation and foreign states” (Natsional’nye otnosheniia 1997: 85).

As a matter of fact, the policy of concluding agreements with other republics and provinces has been in practice since the early 1990s. One of the first such documents was made with neighbouring Tatarstan in 1992. It included a statement according to which the two republics coordinate their actions relating to the Mari and Tatar diaspora groups living on their territories (Ianalov 1997: 74). In addition, there exists an array of agreements with districts where compact diaspora communities are located. Since the spheres of culture and schooling represent the main concern, the contracting party from the side of the Mari Republic is usually either the Ministry of Culture and Nationalities Affairs or the Ministry of Education. More or less connected with the agreements, some progress has been made in recent years, for instance, in reintroducing the teaching of the Mari language in diaspora schools, opening centres of Mari culture and bringing members of the diaspora to Ioshkar-Ola for studies in pedagogical and humanitarian disciplines in the higher educational establishments (Ianalov 1998: 8-9). According to Vasilii Ianalov, the republic’s deputy minister of Culture and Nationalities Affairs in the late 1990s, cooperation in these matters runs quite smoothly with republics of the federation, whereas with Russian provinces the matter is not that easy (Ianalov 1999: 174). The main hindrance, however, is clearly the lack of adequate funding.

In October 1998, Viacheslav Kislitsyn, who at that time was the president of the Republic of Marii El, paid an official two-day visit to the Republic of Bashkortostan, where the most sizeable part of the Mari diaspora (about 100,000 people) lives. Even though Kislitsyn is himself an ethnic Russian, contacts with local Mari played a prominent role in his program. It is therefore appropriate to devote some attention to his visit.<sup>6</sup> The procedures that followed also show that practices had developed between members of the federation in matters of diaspora that are in many ways similar to those observed between independent states.

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<sup>6</sup> For press accounts of the visit see: Shamiev (1998: 1) and Izibaev (1998: 1).

The scene of the first part of the visit was Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan. Together with Murtaza Rakhimov, the president of the host republic, Kislitsyn signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation between the republics. The document is written in Bashkir, Mari, and Russian and is of a very general nature. Collaboration in the fields of culture and the teaching of native language is just briefly mentioned.<sup>7</sup> However, the leaders seem to have exchanged quite a lot of verbal compliments on this topic. Thus, in his speech, Kislitsyn, who during his tenure of power did not usually pay very much attention to questions of nationality, especially expressed his gratitude to the leadership of Bashkortostan for its care for the Mari population's well being. Rakhimov replied by assuring that the state authorities in his republic take all possible measures to preserve the traditions, culture, and languages of the peoples of Bashkortostan. According to press reports Kislitsyn also had a warm meeting with the representatives of the Mari community in Ufa.

The next day the visit continued in the district of Mishkino, which is overwhelmingly inhabited by Mari. Therefore the district is sometimes called a "Little Marii El." As the main centre of Mari in Bashkortostan, the district has relatively frequently been visited by high officials of culture and education from the Mari Republic, but not before by the president of the titular republic. During Kislitsyn's visit an agreement was signed between Mishkino and the Morki district of the Mari Republic. The guests also went to take a closer look at some enterprises, objects of culture, and a village school as well, where Kislitsyn presented new ABC-books to first-graders. Two months after the visit a further step was taken that may add a more state-like nature to the relations between the republics: Basically in order to facilitate the implementation of the new treaty, Kislitsyn nominated a plenipotentiary representative of the Republic of Marii El to the Republic of Bashkortostan. Consequently, Pavel Bikmurzin, the chairman of the Bashkortostan section of *Marii ushem* (the Union of Mari), began to work in this capacity (Bashkortostanshte: 1).

On the basis of the pieces of information presented above, it is clear that coethnics living beyond the borders of the Mari Republic have not remained unnoticed by the authorities of the republic. Moreover, it seems to be widely recognised in the homeland republic that the diaspora needs ethnocultural and educational support. For several reasons, the steps taken in this direction have been modest and circumspect. First of all, the Mari Republic is one of the poorest regions in the Russian Federation. In 2001, of the 89 federation members, it was sixth from the bottom in terms of per capita income (Narod ne buntuet: 4). Accordingly, the host regions of the Mari diaspora are economi-

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<sup>7</sup> The full text of the agreement has been published in *Cholman*, 2-8 December 1998 (no. 45-46).

cally better-off than the homeland republic. This implies that the latter has not been able to allocate essential funding for the ethnocultural support of the diaspora. Moreover, the authorities in Ioshkar-Ola have carefully avoided all possible charges of interference into the internal affairs of the diaspora's host republics/provinces.

## In lieu of a conclusion: towards a typology of Mari diaspora communities

There are good reasons to suppose that diasporic identities tend to be particularly fragmented and multi-layered. Therefore it does not appear reasonable to generalize about the identities observed in diaspora communities. In order to outline various possible identity trajectories for diaspora Russians in the former Soviet republics, Pål Kolstø (1996: 609-39) has devised a taxonomy which brings a certain clarification to the complex field in which identity development takes place. In what follows an attempt will be made to apply a modification of Kolstø's typology to Mari diaspora communities.

The horizontal dimension of Table 2 represents the territorial focus of the diaspora's cultural orientation. In the table three basic options are singled out on this dimension: (1) cultural identification with the main ethnic body in the Mari Republic, (2) development of a specific and largely self-sufficient cultural identity that, however, shares fundamentally the same framework with the Mari culture of the titular republic, and (3) identification with the dominant culture of either the host republic/province or the Russian Federation at large. The vertical dimension of the table depicts the political aspect of identity. The main options in this dimension may be presented in the following way: (1) loyalty directed to the titular republic, (2) an orientation toward establishing a separate autonomous formation, (3) loyalty to the republic/province of current residence, and (4) political orientation directed basically to the federation as a whole.

It goes without saying that the employed scales of gradation are not able to reproduce the finely divided shadings which would better correspond to the reality on both dimensions. It would appear that on the dimension of cultural identity, in particular, there can exist a great variety of different options. In addition, one has to reiterate the fragmented nature of identities, the simultaneous feelings of loyalties to different bodies. Nevertheless, a cross-tabulation of the dimensions makes it possible to systematise the situation to some extent. In principle, a chart with twelve cells is obtained. However, some of the cells seem to be improbable and can thus be omitted. Moreover, there are also cells, most notably those representing irredentism and territorial autonomism, which in the case of the Mari seem largely superfluous for the time being.

TABLE 2. Basic options for territorial orientations of identities of diaspora Mari in the Russian Federation.

		Direction of cultural orientation		
		The Republic of Marii El	Own cultural construction	Other republic/province or the Russian Federation as a whole
Direction of political sympathies	The Republic of Marii El	Irredentism or repatriation sentiments		
	New autonomous unit		Territorial autonomism	
	Other republic/province	Local integration (a)	Local integration (b)	Russification or other assimilation
	The Russian Federation as a whole	Russia-wide integration (a)	Russia-wide integration (b)	Russification

If the possible variants of identification orientations are considered by column, then one first comes across in Table 2 the column representing those members of the diaspora who look upon the titular republic as an unconditional bearer of their ethnic culture. If, in addition, political sympathies are directed at the same republic, the question is about sentiments, which could be characterised as irredentist or repatriationist. However, among the diaspora Mari such attitudes come out very rarely. For instance, there seems to be no serious talk in Mari communities of Kirov province, many of which are immediate neighbours of the Mari Republic, about redrawing the boundary in order to find oneself on the “right” side of the boundary. In regard to repatriation, it touches only the layer of diasporic intelligentsia because the cultural and educational institutions of the titular republic exert on it a certain pull. In connection with this, it is important to note again those actions that are taken in the Mari Republic in order to offer members of the diaspora special admission quotas to educational establishments (Ianalov 1998: 9). Even if these activities are not directed at encouraging repatriation, one can suppose that after completing their studies many of the representatives of the diaspora remain in the Mari Republic.

In a lower position in the same column, there is the case of local integration in which political loyalty is fundamentally directed not to the titular republic but to some other subject of the federation. However, this case presupposes that cultural orientation to the titular republic is maintained. As a hypothetical example one could think about some Mari community in Tatarstan, in which the political values of Tatarstan’s state nationalism, such as highlighted by the slogan “we the Tatarstanians,” has found a response. The bottom cell of the first column refers to those members of Mari diaspora who feel culturally attached

to the Mari Republic but whose main political sympathies are directed to the federation as a whole. Certainly, this kind of orientation can also be found in the republics. However, one can suppose that it is more widespread in the groups living in Russian provinces basically surrounded by Russians. Thus, for instance, the two basic poles which seem to attract identity trajectories of the Ural Mari in Perm' and Sverdlovsk provinces are Russia-wide integration and Russification.

If a diaspora community has in matters of culture a strong initiative of its own, then its activities may be directed to the strengthening of its own specific cultural resources, more or less independent of the homeland republic. The middle column of Table 2 refers to this type of cultural construction. Quite possibly, this kind of activity concurs with strivings for self-rule. If the two aspirations coincide, a question of territorial autonomy is also likely to arise. In regard to the diaspora Mari, one cannot find many written references to claims to autonomy. One of the few is the idea put forward in the early 1990s about the foundation of a Mari autonomous district (*okrug*) in Bashkortostan.<sup>8</sup> At the present time there is complete silence surrounding this question. More realistic are obviously those occasional discussions which concern the level of villages and rural administrations. Some leaders of diaspora communities have expressed the idea of a sort of "national" rural administration: When it is possible, Mari villages should be joined under the same administration – a measure which would help to keep the ethnic culture alive. But even this is a remote dream. Finally, the two lowermost cells of the middle column are analogous to the respective cells of the former column. Here, however, the question is about integration which takes place simultaneously with pursuits to develop the ethnic culture self-sufficiently, separately from the main group in the titular republic. Generally it appears that only the largest group, the Mari of Bashkortostan, may possess enough resources to make their own cultural construction possible. Even regarding Bashkortostan, however, one has to take into account that the Mari of that republic do not by any means constitute a single and unified community.

The column on the right side of the table represents those cases in which the ethnic culture has lost its importance to the members of diaspora to such degree that they are orientated towards the culture of some other people, or attach themselves with the federation-wide culture based on the Russian language. As a result, assimilation processes have accelerated in groups of this kind. It is clear that for the Mari who find themselves in this situation the main road is Russification. Moreover, this takes place both in provinces where the Mari's ethnic contacts are very heavily Russian-dominated, and also in republics where the ethnic environment is usually more mixed. However, assimilation can also take other directions: In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan one also can find evidence about some Tatarisation of the Mari.

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<sup>8</sup> The idea is mentioned in passing in Ibulaev (1997: 275).

Advanced ethnic blending and erosion of ethnic boundaries certainly complicate the investigation of diaspora communities found inside the Russian Federation. The above typology presents a reconnaissance of the ways in which it would be possible to bring about some systematisation to the multitude of potential intra-Russian diasporic identities. There is no doubt that for the Mari – and the same holds true also for the other Finno-Ugrian groups in the Russian Federation – the most relevant alternatives of the scheme presented in Table 2 are those found on the two bottom lines. Accordingly, integration and assimilation processes in their various forms constitute the setting that defines the parameters of the existence of the Mari diaspora.

With the above typology one necessarily comes to the conclusion that from the point of view of the Mari diaspora the substance of integration poses a question of utmost importance. In regard to the authorities of the host republic/province, among the issues of their concern a prominent place is occupied by the task of making sure that a maximal number of citizens are politically loyal to the state. In terms of the typology, this suggests that the authorities' main attention would be directed to the vertical (political) dimension. In a federal state, however, there can be some ambiguity about how the citizenry's political sympathies should be distributed between the entire federation, on the one hand, and one or another of its constituent parts, on the other. It is also evident that different federation members have dissimilar views about this. Even if the authorities usually regard the vertical dimension as one of prime importance, the two dimensions are conceived as interwoven. For this reason the leadership may be not convinced of the loyalty of an ethnocultural minority to the same degree as that of the dominant group. This has caused ambiguity concerning the question of integration: Is it enough that a minority is politically integrated, which would mean that it can maintain its cultural specificity, or should it be integrated also culturally into the culture of the titular group? (Cf., Kolstø 1996: 621 and Kolstø 1998: 52). It is quite possible that statements of some leaders of the republics and provinces are intentionally vague in this respect. However, if the cultural aspect is involved, integration can easily turn into assimilatory policy.

Notwithstanding their weakly developed ethnic consciousness, the Mari belong to those groups which right at the outset of the Soviet rule were granted an autonomous unit with which they could identify. Consequently, ethnicity became territorialised: An array of issues which might have remained basically regional acquired ethnic content. Formal spatially-bound outlets for ethnocultural aspirations also brought up the question of diasporas. In post-Soviet Russia there exists a strong lobby for turning back "ethnic" to "regional." Two basic solutions contributing to this end have been offered. The first is the "symmetrisation" of the federation by means of enlarging its constituent parts and, along with this, abolishing republics and other ethnically defined formations. Not surprisingly, this approach has become an object of fierce resistance from the side of the

republics and minorities. Another approach which, as it is hoped, would contribute to neutralising the internal boundaries is extraterritorial cultural autonomy. The 1996 federal law on national cultural autonomy is advocated as a means by which, in particular, the problems of intra-Russian diaspora groups can be solved. However, the absence of the principles for a civil society poses serious obstacles for the implementation of the law. For this reason there is a lot of skepticism among the diaspora communities about the real possibilities that the law has to offer.

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