



Regional Identity in the Making: Consuming Siberian, Becoming Siberian

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Abstract: The essay discusses the construction of Siberian regional identity through consumption with use of Siberian regional brands. Siberian identity is conceptualized as a dynamic phenomenon being actively formed through people's activities at the territory of the region. Consumption is seen as one of the key sites and tools for this identity construction and also as a form of regional patriotism. The context of Siberian identity construction is analyzed, and the key distinction is drawn between cultural and socio-economic dimensions of the regional identity. Two successful regional brands, 'I'm Siberian' and 'Monstratsiia' ['Monstration'], are analyzed to illustrate this distinction. The paper reflects on the tension between cultural and socio-economic dimensions of regional identity in consumption. It also argues that there are probably no apolitical forms of consumer mobilization around regional identity in today's Russia.

Keywords: regional identity, Siberian identity, consumption, regional brand, regional patriotism

Over recent years we have seen the rise of regional identities in Russia.¹ For example, the all-Russian Census of 2010 showed a sharp increase in the amount of people identifying their 'nationality' (in fact, the census questionnaire asks about ethnic belonging) as Siberian ('Sibiriakov' v Rossii...' 2011). At the same time, many regional initiatives, in particular the ones that appeal to regional identities and enhance local solidarities, often attract the attention of the federal government as potentially dangerous for the country's territorial unity. Because of that, the law that criminalizes 'the calls for separatism' was recently strengthened.² As a result, regional initiatives receive even more attention from the regional and federal authorities. This attention gets stronger in the context of current geopolitical

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struggles, such as increasing tensions in international relations due to annexation of Crimea resulted in sanctions imposed by the US, EU and several other countries, and countersanctions, introduced in response by Russia. This attention is also reflected in many other initiatives that are described as the ‘patriotic turn’ (Daucé 2015).

Consumption is also becoming one of the sites for geopolitical and economic struggles: the above mentioned countersanctions led to the so-called politics of ‘import phase-out’ (*politika importozameshcheniia*) on behalf of the state, heated discussions in the media about ritualistic state-sponsored initiatives abolishing imported food, the emergence of patriotic brands of food, clothes, and other consumer goods. The devaluation of the Russian national currency sets limits on the purchasing power of the Russian population; however, local initiatives in production and consumption receive more opportunities and have some potential advantage because of that.

The increase in patriotism has become a noticeable development and is reflected in production and consumption. However, as previous research shows, this rise of patriotism is perceived ambivalently. In business, the dual reality of the global market and national politics results in a lack of consistent rhetoric in regards to patriotism articulated by the business community who both gain and lose from it (Barsukova, Dufy 2013). In everyday consumption practices, because of the simultaneous effect of the economic crisis and (counter)sanctions, the use of pointedly Russian branded images (Rueters 2015) can go hand in hand with purchases of banned products once a Russian tourist goes abroad. In fashion, in addition to officially promoted ‘patriotic fashion’, patriotism is expressed in other forms, from globally-oriented ‘cosmopolitan patriotism’ to regionally-oriented ‘fashion localism’ (Gurova 2016).

In this essay I argue that construction of regional identity through consumption can be considered as a form of manifestation of regional patriotism, or love of one’s small homeland, which is constructed through, and expressed in activities on the territory (Anisimova, Echevskaia 2012). This regional identity actualization in Russia occurs in at least two contextual frames. Firstly, globalization is an important context for actualization of regional identities: the world is becoming more open and widely visible due to spread of accessible Internet, intensifying migrations and a growing tourism industry. Identities are now constructed and problematized through the encounters with Others from all over the globe. Secondly, the factors of national scale in Russia are of importance: the growing gap between federal center, Moscow, and the regions in terms of economic opportunities and quality of life; and the changing relations between federal center and the regions that contribute to regional identity formation. For instance, in the past, during Soviet times, Siberia used to be seen by the state as a strategically important part of the big (Soviet) project, whereas now it is often seen as a remote and unevenly developed region, a troubled land with the great past and unclear future (Anisimova, Echevskaia 2013; Kryukov 2011; Seliverstov 2015).

These two contexts – the global level of cultural expression and the national level of socio-economic inequalities and tensions – open up the two dimensions of identity that I sug-

² In 2013, a new law was introduced into the criminal code as article 280.1, formulated as ‘Public appeals to implementation of actions aimed at violating the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation’. The penalty under part 1 of this article ranges from a fine of up to 300 thousand rubles to imprisonment for up to three years. In July 2014 the law was corrected to increase the maximum term of imprisonment from 3 to 4 years. The same acts, committed with the use of media and the Internet, can result in five years in prison. See: Putin has increased the punishment for the calls for separatism (‘Putin strengthened...’ 2014)

gest to conceptualize in this essay: a cultural dimension, where identity is a form of expressing love and belonging to the small homeland based on culture, history, land, nature and people; and a socio-economic dimension, where identity is connected to the people's claims for recognition from the federal center, or the federal authorities, based on socio-economic inequalities between the federal center and the regions.

The cultural dimension of regional identity can be linked to cultural representations of Siberia, which are also ambivalent. As scholars Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine put it, Siberia from the very beginning was represented as both the frightening heart of darkness and a fabulous land of plenty; the 'House of the Dead' and the realm of utter freedom; a frozen wasteland and a colourful frontier; a dumping ground for Russia's rejects and the last refuge of its lost innocence (Diment and Slezkine 1993: 2-6). Today Siberia is depicted as the wild land of freedom, where severe conditions of living are accompanied by beautiful nature, rich culture, heroic history and friendly people, which is reflected in positive regional identity and the so-called 'Siberian character' (Clowes 2013).

In socio-economic terms, today's Siberia is often described as a sparsely populated area, very unevenly developed (Zubarevich 2012), losing its population (Antipin 2012; Shevtsov 2013), and becoming a target for large-scale and costly development projects initiated by the federal center, which often fails to address many regionally-specific problems (Seliverstov 2015). This socio-economic dimension has particular significance in relation to the political meaning of regional identity. This political meaning is twofold. First, regional identity can play a key role in the strategic development of the region due to its potential of keeping people actively engaged in solving the regional problems of the territory (Anisimova, Echevskaia 2013). Second, regional identity can take the form of protest, when Siberians pressured by worsening socio-economic conditions can manifest their regional identity claims by protesting. Such identity actualization can be seen by the authorities as potentially 'dangerous' for the Russian territorial unity (Antipin 2011; Mikhailov 2011). I suggest in this essay that both dimensions of regional identity, cultural and socio-economic, can be explored through the lens of consumption and, in particular, through the activities of regional brands, their messages and how these messages are interpreted by the brands, the authorities and the consumers.

Therefore, the goal of this essay is to analyze how regional identity comes into play in consumption. With that in mind, I will first analyze what Siberian identity means conceptually and how it is linked to consumption. Then I will proceed to the cases of regional brands, 'I am Siberian' and 'Monstratsiia', to illustrate how regional identity unfolds in consumption; what kind of tensions the messages of these brands evoke; and the differences of interpretations of these messages. I will argue that the actualization of regional identity through consumption can become not only a form of active expression of belonging to a particular territory, but also a form of political struggle.

Data and methods

This essay is based on data collected from three main sources. For a conceptual outline of Siberian identity, I use interviews collected in 2011 by Alla Anisimova and myself for the

project ‘Sibiriak: sostavliaiushchie obraza, osobennosti identichnosti’ [Siberian: elements of image, peculiarities of identity].³ For the analysis of empirical cases, ‘I am Siberian’ and ‘Monstratsiia’, I use documents sourced from media (articles and interviews in regional and federal press published since 2010 and focusing on either of the two empirical cases) and from social media (VKontakte and Twitter postings from the official ‘I am Siberian’ and ‘Monstratsiia’ groups). I also use the notes and photographs I collected in two participant observation sessions, in TEDx event ‘Global Siberia’ (May 22, 2016), where the founder of the brand ‘I’m Siberian’ gave the opening talk, and in ‘Monstratsiia’ (May 1, 2016).

The rationale for choosing these two cases – ‘I am Siberian’ and ‘Monstratsiia’ – is again twofold: first, both cases represent successful regional (Siberian) brands; second, both appeal to Siberian identity in their brand messages and address cultural and socio-economic dimensions of the regional identity. The brand ‘I am Siberian’ (<http://imsiberian.com/>) started as a ‘t-shirt selling Internet-project’ few years ago, and grew into an umbrella initiative, which includes merchandising branded consumer goods, organizing travel routes and cultural initiatives. ‘Monstratsiia’ (https://vk.com/monstration_nsk) is the annual event that was launched in 2004 by Siberian artist Artem Loskutov as an absurdist cultural performance, but eventually it gained popularity across the country and turned into a noticeable political phenomenon to a large extent because of how regional authorities interpreted it. ‘I am Siberian’ is a commercial brand, whereas ‘Monstratsiia’ has started to commercialize only recently, by selling art objects and consumer goods created by its founder Artem Loskutov.

Siberian identity as social construction: active engagement as key to becoming Siberian

Our previous research has shown that Siberian identity is not unproblematic or given, rather it is a product of people’s active engagement with particular types of activities in the territory (Anisimova, Echevskaia 2012). As ‘the resettlers’ land, on the one hand, and as a remote territory with severe conditions of living, on the other, Siberia brings together people of diverse backgrounds who are learning to live together in multicultural environment, and become Siberians by doing things together in the face of the challenging living conditions. Interestingly, being born in Siberia does not necessarily imply having Siberian identity: we have interviewed people who were born in Siberia and did not have an active Siberian identity. Leaving Siberia does not necessarily lead to losing Siberian identity (moreover, it can even contribute to its strengthening). However, the mode of engagement with the territory (professional, recreational, personal, etc.) is crucially important for the formation and actualization of Siberian identity.

Consumption is also one of the tools and sites of construction of Siberian regional identity in today’s Russia. Sometimes it is one of the most easily accessible tools. For instance, in our interviews, we’ve seen this in Omsk where wearing a scarf of a local Avangard hockey team and drinking locally-produced beer Sibirskaya korona [Siberian crown] worked as pow-

³ The project was conducted in 2011-2012 (fieldwork: 2011) and supported by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. 60 interviews were collected in three Siberian cities: Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Omsk. The sample was constructed in a way allowing capturing intra-biographical diversity: we used place of birth and residence, family history, migration biography ethnicity, professional field, as criteria for selecting our informants, and interviewed people from younger and older generations. Some characteristics of the interviewees are given in brackets when cited (first letter of the first name, age, gender, city of residence).

erful tools for demonstrating regional belonging even among poorer people (Anisimova, Echevskaia 2012). However, consumption is indeed about having access to consumer goods. It has been stated that Russia is an unevenly developed consumer society (Il'in 2005; Zubarevich 2012), and Siberia is no exception. Big cities have better access to what consumer culture can offer: shopping streets, shopping malls, global brands, while smaller and more remote cities and towns often join consumer society rather as spectators, especially in the context of the current economic crisis when food expenses constitute more than 50% of all Russian household spending, and consumer activity is shrinking (Bondarenko 2016).

Siberia is no less unevenly economically developed due to its diverse geographical profile: according to the State statistical bureau, the population of Siberia consists of 19,3 million people (about 13 percent of Russia's population) living on more than 5 million square km (30 percent of the Russia's territory), and there are only three cities in the region with a population over one million people (Novosibirsk, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk). Five more cities have a population between 500 000 and 1 000 000 (Barnaul, Irkutsk, Kemerovo, Novokuznetsk, Tomsk); 89 towns have a population of less than 50 000 (official statistics: gks.ru).

Thus, as Russian economic geographer Natalia Zubarevich states metaphorically, Siberia comprises 'four Russias' that exist out there, namely, the land of postindustrial cities, blue-collar workers' towns, rural and semi-urban areas and underdeveloped areas (Zubarevich 2012). While some of these 'Russias' fully embrace consumer society; others have only limited access to it, instead practicing domestic production and barter. Consumption as an identity-constructing activity is global and least tied to the territory: for example, one can 'consume Siberia' anywhere in the world. At the same time, the link between individual consumption and social identity as I draw it in this essay (cf. Bourdieu 1984; Dittmar 2007; Du Gay 1996) characterizes contemporary urban life; therefore, it must be evident in the big Siberian cities. The link between consumption and Siberian identity in rural and underdeveloped parts of Siberia would require additional analysis.

As mentioned before, urban Siberian identity formation is closely related to the active engagement of people with the region and its problems (Anisimova, Echevskaia 2012). On the macro-level, Siberian identity is shaped by the following three factors: the multicultural composition of the population, intensive migration in and out of the region, and the severe living conditions. The multicultural environment leads to cultural adjustment to other people's cultures, traditions, and practices. Intensive migration to, and from, Siberian cities, results in mixing 'natives' and 'newcomers', and the people who have not settled in the region for generations develop mobile and active modes of identity formation. The need to adjust to the environment adds to participation and engagement as important parts of becoming a Siberian (Anisimova, Echevskaia 2012). The interviewees told us that you need to do something in (and for) your region in order to become Siberian: 'They [Siberians] created something here, constructed something, and stayed, and it is their contribution, belonging to the common cause, which make them feel themselves Siberians' (A., male, 50, Irkutsk).

For some interviewees, the source of this attitude is rooted in the Soviet past, when the strategic importance of the region in the Socialist industrialization project contributed to the special position of the people and of the region, and to personal dignity for people living in the region. Others indicated that Siberian identity is based on and produces certain traits of people's character ('Siberian character'): 'Conditions of the external environment are tem-

pering, I would not say that it spoils us in any way [...] The spirit is stronger, and the people are stronger, both physically and morally. And more tolerant, I think... more tolerant and more patient' (N, 32, female, Omsk). Moscow is a point of reference for many Siberians identifying themselves in comparison to Moscow as the Other inside the country. Autostereotypes are also articulated in terms of the difference between the European part of Russia and Siberia: 'Siberian character, as compared to European character, is less oriented towards social success and more – towards informal human connections and friendship' (V, 44, male, Irkutsk).

While migration, the multicultural environment and the harsh climate are characteristic of many resettlement societies, there is one thing which is specific to Siberia: the particular type of spatially-bound social inequalities, both inside the region and inside the country. Here we arrive at the socio-economic dimension of Siberian identity. The relationships between the federal center and the region are problematic in many respects: uneven distribution and redistribution of taxes, privatization of businesses and tourist attractions in the region by the federal center, urban development projects initiated by the federal center and prioritizing financial benefits over preservation of traditional cultures, etc. The perceived asymmetry and injustice of these relationships frame the Siberian identity in a particular, critically-engaged, way (for more on that see: Anisimova, Echevskaia 2013): 'If Siberia is treated as the store-room of Moscow, and Siberians are seen as the second-rate people, they will unite around the negative identification' (V, 60, male, historian, Novosibirsk). This potential of protest in Siberian regional identity makes its manifestations political (Mikhailov 2011).

How do the two dimensions of Siberian identity relate to consumption? First, consumption gives material for identity construction. In the interviews, we can see that consumption appears as one of the important tools and sources of identification in making this distinction by offering the 'building blocks', which are mobile, visible and easy-to-incorporate. People feel themselves Siberians when they consume local food, buy local brands, support sports teams: 'I feel myself Siberian when I support 'Lokomotiv', the volleyball club from Novosibirsk' (A., 41, men. Novosibirsk).

It is worth mentioning that in the memories of the Soviet times our interviewees often recalled that consumption was an important source of distinction between the regions: many said that Moscow was the 'consumption paradise' where one could always buy chocolate and sausage, unlike in Siberia. Consumption opportunities were never equal inside the region either, so they became a reason for symbolic competition between Siberian cities:

I got married in Tomsk and first brought my husband here [to Omsk]. We entered a food store, and he screamed: 'Galya, look! Sausage!' [meaning that supply of products, i.e. sausages, was better in Omsk] Clothes in Novosibirsk were a bit different, but the food was much worse. Tomsk was hungry too. Omsk was among the best! (G., 59, female, Omsk).

For younger Siberians consumption has become perhaps the key site for regional identity construction. While older generations often use the Soviet Siberia as a point of reference and recall cultural and historical facts (though sometimes about consumption) while talking about regional identity, younger Siberians express themselves largely through consumption. This is especially visible in bigger cities where globalization and consumer society have the most in-

fluence. As our interviews show, consumption can be used in two ways: to express rather positive feelings of belonging to Siberia in a cultural sense, and to deal with frustration and feeling of relative deprivation caused by the socio-economic inequalities and injustice.

To sum up this section briefly: Siberian identity is not given; rather, it is constructed through active engagement of people in various activities related to the region, and consumption is one of the significant activities of this kind. There is an important divide between cultural and socio-economic dimensions of Siberian identity. Expressed in cultural terms, Siberian identity is rather a positive self-project, emerging from active engagement with the territory and involving multiple references to nature, severe living conditions, special traits of character, tolerance and openness to diversity and difference while expressing belonging and the love of one's small homeland. The socioeconomic dimension of Siberian identity, still emerging from active engagement with the territory, adds to Siberian identity a bitter taste of deprivation: the ambiguous relationship between federal center and the region, both in terms of the remoteness of Siberia and the growing socio-economic gap between them, contributes to the construction of protesting identities which take form of political claims. The contrast between these two dimensions helps to explain the ambivalent reception of regional identity in messages communicated by regional brands. The following sections illustrate this based on the two empirical cases linking consumption and Siberian regional identity.

'I'm Siberian': the brand constructing Siberian regional identity

The brand 'I'm Siberian' was introduced in 2012 by Siberian businessman Vladimir Cherepanov. It happened at the times of increased interest in Siberian regional identity in the context of the 2010 census, when many people registered as 'Siberians', and regional public political rallies appealed to Siberian regional identity in their messages to the federal center (more on the context see: Anisimova, Echevskaia 2013). The project started in 2012 by selling T-shirts packaged as snowflakes (Shiryshv 2012), and has grown into a set of initiatives. Among them are 'bear taxis' (drivers dressed as bears), the 'Baikal trophy' (expedition to Baikal on jeeps in winter), 'White sands of Siberia' (people snowboarding in Altai mountains in swimsuits) and 'Siberian neo-archaic' (a virtual exhibition stressing a special connection between people and nature in Siberia).⁴

The initial concept of the brand was to attract Siberians' attention to their own region: it targeted urban consumers, and it sent complex cultural messages directly appealing to Siberian regional identity. However, despite having these local roots, the brand also has global intentions, addressing the community of Siberians living all over the globe:

Now [we are present] in nearly all big Siberian cities. I think we will take Moscow soon, [...], and St. Petersburg. Then we will go abroad, to other countries. Because we, Siberians, are very active, and even if we move somewhere, like to Canada or Argentina, we remain Siberians. (I'm Siberian... 2016)

The message that the brand sends to consumers clearly engages with the cultural dimension of Siberian identity: becoming strong through living in the wild, being connected to Siberian

⁴ All projects by 'I'm Siberian' are listed and briefly described here: <http://imsiberian.com/projects/>

nature, having Siberian character, being patriots of one's own small homeland. The brand does not only sell goods: it sells lifestyle inviting consumers to actively engage with the Siberian environment, to challenge themselves in the face of Siberian climate, to snowboard,

Image 1. Siberian bear offers an invitation to the lecture he will be giving.



Source: Facebook.com [<http://bit.ly/2ocGP7B>] (20.03.2017).

to climb mountains, or to enjoy the beauty of Siberian nature in works of art and therefore to join the community of Siberians. By inviting consumers to join this lifestyle, the brand does the identity construction work linking the goods and elements of lifestyle people consume to the traits of so-called Siberian character and Siberians as the community of people.

Importantly, the current geopolitical tensions have not shifted the accents in the brand message: it keeps the focus on regional identity while remaining open and friendly towards the global world, which constitutes a particular mode of patriotic consumption, a version of patriotism with global intentions opposed to the parochial neo-conservative and nation-centered official discourse (cf. Gurova 2016). 'I'm Siberian' is a case of branding where Siberian nature and culture serve as inspiration for the brand with global orientation and positioning (see Image 1).

Image 2. ‘The whole world is Siberia’ [Ves’ mir – Sibir’]



Source: Olga Echevskaia

Image 3. ‘The game of spaces’ [Igra prostorov]⁵



Source: Olga Echevskaia

⁵ In Russian ‘The game of spaces’ (Igra prostorov) is an allusion to ‘The game of thrones’ [Igra prestolov])

Image 4. ‘In Siberia [we] don’t cry’ [V Sibiri ne plachut]



Source: Olga Echevskaia

Image 5. ‘Moscow? Where is it?’ [Moskva? Eto gde?]



Source: Olga Echevskaia

‘The whole world is Siberia’: regional identity with a global message

TEDx, a locally organized TED event in the form of edutainment (education with entertaining elements) titled ‘Global Siberia’, was held in Novosibirsk scientific center, Akademgorodok, on May 22, 2016. The event presented ideas developed by the Siberians that were worth spreading worldwide. Fourteen speakers shared a wide range of ideas, from cloning a mammoth to changing the world for the better utilizing satellites, big data, or crowdfunding technologies (see <http://www.tedxnovosibirsk.ru/>). The first speaker of the event, introduced as the ‘Siberian bear’, was Vladimir Cherepanov. Dressed as bear, Cherepanov presented the brand ‘I’m Siberian’ (Image 2).

The ‘bear’ started his talk with the story of a publication in the MailOnline that presented the ‘White sands of Siberia’, one of the projects launched by ‘I’m Siberian’ brand. According to this publication, this was the initiative of the Russian tourism board (*Federal’noe agentstvo po turizmu*) to attract tourists to the Russia’s coldest and largely unpopulated region (the publication is available online, see Amey 2014). The rest of the talk was Cherepanov’s response to this media publication and such representation of Siberia. He emphasized that the project is in fact not run by the state and has nothing to do with the Russian tourism board; it is 100% local initiative. He stated, perhaps controversially, that there is no need to attract the world to Siberia, because Siberia itself is the whole world (Image 2). Then he confirmed that Siberia is a wild land with open spaces (Image 3) and strong people (Image 4).

He stressed again that the idea of the project is mostly to change the attitude of the people living in Siberia towards their own land and local tourism, and to invite Siberians to rediscover their own region. Yet, Siberia is a place to love, and everyone, not only local people, can of course join. Here we again see the appeal to regional identity as one of the key messages of the brand, with both local and global dimensions.

Moscow as a point of reference for Siberian identity also appeared in the presentation, this time in a new context, but still keeping the status of the Other in the country (Image 5). The message on the slide was playing with the stereotype of a Muscovite who does not know Russian geography beyond the Ural mountains well enough, and asks questions like: ‘Omsk? Where is it?’ While on the surface the message is that Russia has many interesting places aside from Moscow, the tensions between the federal center and the regions is also obvious.

As for the political connotations of this cultural and commercial project, there was an attempt to attach a political meaning of separatism to the brand’s message. Here is the quote in which this claim is articulated and addressed by Cherepanov:

Question: Have you ever been accused of separatism? There are many geopolitical fears [...] and you claim to the world that you are not ordinary Russians but the special ones – Siberians? One thing is when a city like Perm expresses its local patriotism, but when a huge region demands special treatment – that is another story. Aren’t you afraid that some regional politician will take your ‘joke’ seriously and will attach some aggressive slogans to it?

Cherepanov: To tell the truth, I do not understand these fears. Quite the opposite, I believe that the project ‘I’m Siberian’ will help people in Siberia to become more confident, they will understand that they have future, that there are many exceptional people around,

and it is a great place to live and work. We have something to say to the world. And we initially stated our goal as not to engage with politics or religion – these are dividing factors, and our goal is unifying, and it must have different foundations: social, personal, based on natural human relationships. We are against aggression of any kind (Shiryshv 2012).

This political meaning of the brand and its message is unavoidable and illustrates the tension between the federal center and the region. A clearly stated non-political message nevertheless is perceived politically. In the following section I will address this in detail, taking into account the second case, ‘Monstratsiia’, in which this tension is demonstrated even more strongly.

‘It is not Moscow here’: Siberian identity as a political claim

As it is described in its VKontakte group, ‘Monstratsiia’ (Monstration, meaning the act of demonstration and at the same time referring to ‘monster’ in its name) was first held in Novosibirsk in 2004 as the ‘mostly apolitical’ artistic performance, a peaceful protest, and a parody of the Labor Day demonstration traditionally held in Russia on the first of May. About 80 young people walked in a separate column of the main Labor Day demonstration holding what looked like ‘absurdist slogans’, which either carry no meaning (for instance, ‘Y-y-yt’) or meant something not directly related to the demonstration (for example, ‘Tanya, don’t cry’, which is a reference to a children’s poem).

‘Monstratsiia’, invented by the Siberian artist Artem Loskutov, is conceptualized as a form of public art, and positioned itself ‘in-between artistic activity, social activity and political gesture. Absurdist in its form, it transgresses the boundaries of traditional politics, and opens up space for creativity and self-expression in the lack of public politics in the country’ (‘Monstration: contemporary...’ 2016). Such absurdist statements can be interpreted as a way of speaking in the situation of ‘public aphasia’, or despite various barriers in communication and lack of skills among citizens to discuss significant issues publicly (Gladarev 2015: 280). This approach is a creative way of speaking that people use in the context of multiple barriers in communication. When Loskutov answered the question about the root of this idea, together with history of art he mentioned the flashmob-inspired forms of civic activism ‘from below’ (Matveeva 2017).

Today ‘Monstratsiia’ comprises a set of events attracting thousands of people every year and held in many Russian cities from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok with the central event still taking place in Novosibirsk. The reception of ‘Monstratsiia’ by people and by federal and regional authorities has been ambivalent and fickle since 2004. For instance, in 2011 Artem Loskutov was awarded the prestigious contemporary art award ‘Innovation’ as ‘The Best regional project’. The award was established by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and The State Center for Contemporary Art (‘Monstration received...’ 2011). In 2016 ‘Monstratsiia’ attracted more than 2000 people in Novosibirsk and ran peacefully together with the official annual first of May demonstration guarded by police. However, after the event was over, Loskutov was arrested and sentenced to paying a fine for running ‘Monstratsiia’, which was claimed to be illegal, showing no signs of a cultural event.

Image 6. ‘It is not Moscow here’ [Zdes’ vam ne Moskva]



Source: Olga Echevskaia

Image 7. ‘Monstratsiia’-2016 few seconds before its start



Source: Olga Echevskaia

This tradition of tension between ‘Monstratsiia’ and the regional authorities is as well established as ‘Monstratsiia’ itself. Every year the procedure of official approval of the event by the city authorities in Novosibirsk (the approval is required by law) is complicated and ends with restrictions put on ‘Monstratsiia’. It is difficult to say what started first: the authorities treating ‘Monstratsiia’ with suspicion and making attempts to ban it, or ‘Monstratsiia’, ‘absorbing the context’ (in Loskutov’s words) and becoming too political to be allowed without restrictions on the side of the regional authorities. Either way, over nearly 15 years the event has transformed from a small artistic performance to a significant act of civic solidarity reacting to the political agenda that is more or less evident to regional and federal authorities.

The majority of the slogans in the crowd look apolitical, and the crowd itself looks like rather a carnival than a protest rally: people are dressed in costumes, do not show any signs of aggression, do not make political claims but rather have fun. Image 6 shows the crowd after the event is over: people gather on the stairs of Novosibirsk public library to take a photo together. However if we look at the key slogans⁶ of Novosibirsk ‘Monstratsiia’ of the last few years, we will see references to political agenda of the time. For instance, in 2014 the key slogan was ‘Hell is ours’ [Ad nash], which is an allusion to another slogan of that time – the patriotic ‘Crimea is ours’ [Krym nash]. In 2015 the key slogan says ‘God forgive us’ [Gospodi prosti], referring to the Russian Orthodox Church, which was in the center of major tensions of that time. Therefore, the event is disturbing to the authorities: an absurdist apolitical art performance communicates protest messages in creative and unconventional way, in both its form and content.

Image 7 depicts ‘Monstratsiia’ in 2016, a few seconds before it begins. People on the front row hold the banner ‘It is not Moscow here’ [Zdes’ vam ne Moskva]. This slogan was taken from the letter of refusal to approve ‘Monstratsiia’ that Loskutov received from the regional authorities in 2016. The flag on the upper left corner of the picture is the flag of ‘United States of Siberia’ created by Damir Muratov, a conceptual artist from Omsk. The initial message was an ironic reference to the American painter Jasper Johns’s work named ‘Flag’, which depicted the American flag, but Muratov’s flag had snowflakes instead of stars on it. This flag became a controversial symbol of the Siberian regional identity. On the one hand, it is used by the people to manifest their belonging to Siberia. On the other hand, as Muratov bitterly accepts, the ‘separatist’ interpretations of the flag are common, and media articles about the ‘anti-separatist laws’ that I mentioned in the beginning of the essay are often illustrated with the ‘United States of Siberia’ flag (Gruzdeva 2014). Thus, the flag as material object of consumption can become a statement that is interpreted in different ways by various actors. It is an expression of separatism for authorities; it is also an expression of regional identity for people who see it as manifestation of the cultural dimension of the regional identity (snowflakes) or socio-economic dimension and claims for economic federalism and more economic freedom for the region vis-à-vis the federal center.

⁶ The key slogan is a short phrase written on a big banner (usually it is a piece of fabric), which is hold by the front row of people (see Image 7). The slogan is usually kept in secret and is disclosed only at the day of the event.

In lieu of conclusion

Let us now go back to the ‘I’m Siberian’ brand and to the ‘separatist’ interpretation of expression of regional identity in consumption discussed in the previous section. In 2012, the brand ‘I’m Siberian’, which claimed to be apolitical, used the expression ‘United States of Siberia’ on one of its products (Image 8). This expression immediately drew attention from both sides: by those who used it to show the unity and communicate belonging to the region, and by those who interpreted this message as separatism (Zhaivoron 2016). Therefore, in September 2012, the official ‘I’m Siberian’ group VKontakte communicated the official position of the brand: ‘we are against separatism, and we are against putting our project in political or religious context’. As a result, products with the ‘United States of Siberia’ expression were removed from production (the full text is still available in the group: https://vk.com/topic-38519836_26969041).

This act of removal is important for understanding the link between consumption, regional identity and regional patriotism in the following ways. First, it illustrates how regional identity can be constructed through consumption. It also shows how regional identity and its manifestation in consumption can receive political meaning. The brand engaging with the regional identity, having commercial intentions and claiming to be apolitical, must be prepared to be interpreted as provoking separatism in the current context in Russia. The two passport covers above (Image 8 and Image 9) are different, but not that much; however, the first cover was removed from production as ‘separatist’, and the second one is still produced, and is quite popular (I own one).

Second, the situation illustrates the role of Internet and, in particular, social media in communicating, negotiating and arguing about the regional brand message. Today, for a regional brand, existing in social media may be the synonym of existing as such. Both cases discussed in this essay – ‘I’m Siberian’ and ‘Monstratsiia’ – gained their popularity in the region and beyond thanks to the Internet and social media. Social media were utilized to build the brands’ audience and are used for cooperation and communication with and among the audience. For a commercial brand like ‘I’m Siberian’ it gives new opportunities in sales and responsibilities in direct communication to and with consumers, and also with the regional authorities, who are inevitably engaged if the brand appeals to regional identity or regional patriotism in its message.

Thus the general conclusion of the essay is that regional brands which appeal to regional identity and regional patriotism are inevitably engaged in politics as much as in consumption. Perhaps it is not possible to develop a brand appealing to regional identity which avoids the political, at least currently in Russia.

There are two key dimensions of identity explaining the link between regional identity, politics and consumption in Russia today. One is the dimension I refer to in this essay as ‘cultural’ related to Siberian character and nature and less politically problematized at the moment. The other is socio-economic dimension, and it is highly political because of the current socio-economic context. Siberian regional identity is constructed through various activities, which allow the expression of belonging to the region. Consumption is among the most readily available and accessible activities of that kind, appealing in the context of big cities and in particular for younger people. Although such consumption activities can gain separatist inter-

pretations, they have great potential of being a base for constructive regional solidarities, active engagement and emotional belonging to one's small homeland.

Image 8. Passport cover 'I'm Siberian', 'United States of Siberia' with the snowflake logo.

— Если спросить американца, откуда он, в ответ вы сначала услышите название штата, а потом страну. Цель в том, чтобы что-то похожее было с сибиряками?

— Здесь нет конфликта между русским и сибирским. Это было бы неправильно. Скажем так, брендинг России гораздо более сложный. Там очень много вопросов, проблем, которые нужно решать, — это дело не одного года. Понятно, что ты русский. Но сибирский — это тоже круто. Мы с помощью проекта об этом напомнили, подсказали.

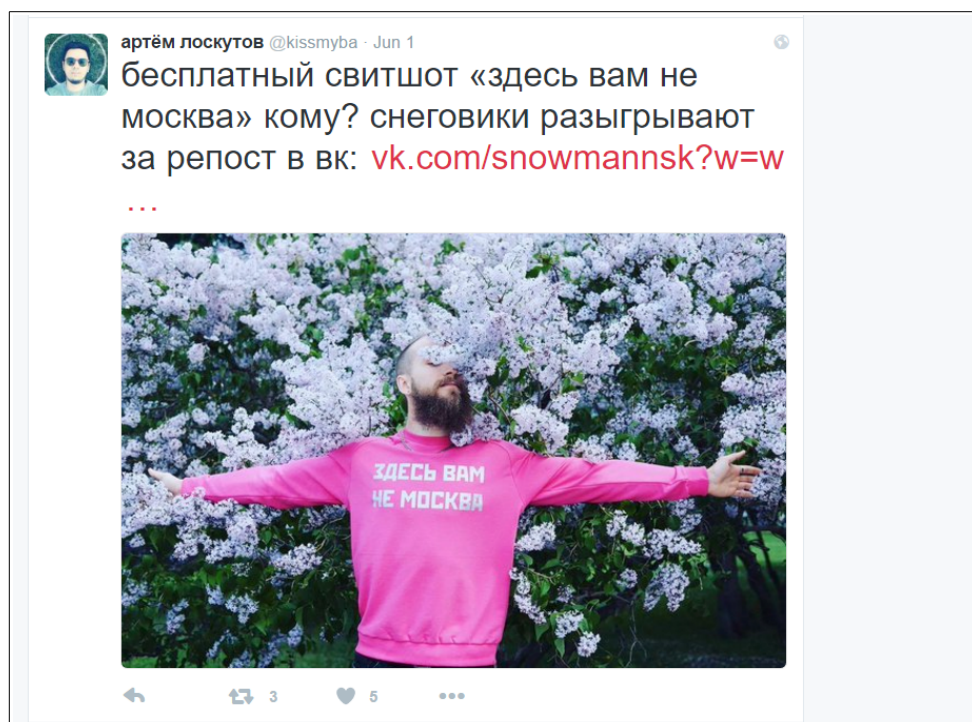


Source: Siburbia (Zhaivoron 2016).

Image 9. Passport cover 'I'm Siberian' with the snowflake logo



Source: en.imsiberian.com (01.06.2016).

Image 10. Sweatshirt ‘It is not Moscow here’ [Zdes’ vam ne Moskva].

Source: <https://twitter.com/kissmyba> (20.02.2017).

Postscript: In the meantime, ‘Monstratsiia’ has made an attempt to commercialize its activities. A sweatshirt with the expression ‘It is not Moscow here’ (with the label ‘Monstrattsiia-2016’ on its back) is now on sale (Image 10). T-shirts with the image of Damir Muratov’s ‘Siberian flag’ are also available.

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