Exploring Sensitive Topics in an Authoritarian Context: An Insider Perspective

Object. This article examines the methodological challenges of ethnographic research on ethnic and religious minorities, in an authoritarian context in the Russian Federation, conducted by an insider-researcher. *Method.* The article focuses on the peculiarities of the insider position in the field of research on understudied topics concerning ethnic and religious minorities. These cover issues of influence of national and local academic agendas on the process of the research, credibility management in a highly dynamic political environment, research safety and the researcher's influence on the field. *Results.* The article identifies three main challenges in doing ethnography in illiberal settings. First, the imposition of oblique political limitations on the research agenda of local researchers creates a form of methodological nationalism, leading to a paucity of research on some critical topics. Second, the continuous introduction of new restrictive legislation not only results in difficulties of accessing the field, but also demands constant re-evaluation of the sensitivity of the questionnaire. Respondents often express anxiety while discussing even quotidian practices because it becomes difficult for them to anticipate whether, when or how new restrictive legislation will be enforced. Thus, they expect insider researchers to be aware of the legal ramifications of their research. Not only does this nullify the author's ability to adopt a stance of naivety, it also means that researchers bear a greater burden in convincing respondents that the information provided will be handled responsibly. Finally, the ethnographer is constantly faced with difficult decisions regarding both scholarly and ethical reliability and, hence, is required to continuously review research ethics in such a dynamic political context. This article offers suggestions for overcoming these difficulties by means of social networking services and constant critical reflexivity. *Conclusion.* Authoritarian settings pose many challenges to insider researchers. The study of minority groups can be particularly sensitive, since illiberal regimes often seek to homogenize their populations and portray minority groups as a threat to justify the state's increasing control over the population. Exploring even mundane, everyday manifestations of ethnicity in such situations can become highly sensitive and raise methodological problems such as limitation of available academic literature and funding, greater responsibility for research and participants' safety, and forced partisanship.

Introduction

Scholars of authoritarianism often argue that apart from the lack of fair elections, authoritarian regimes are also characterized by violations of the rights to freedom of expression and access to information which make fieldwork in areas under such regime

especially difficult. However, authoritarianism does not necessarily undermine the generation of meaningful data (Reny 2016). In spite of academic reflections on risks, challenges and ethics in doing fieldwork in authoritarian settings (Glasius, et al. 2017, Wackenhut 2017 Goode and Stroup 2016, Goode 2010), there is a lack of reflection on methodological difficulties of doing research on ethnic minorities in such contexts. This paper aims to provide such a reflection which is necessary for developing a better methodology to explore national connotations in daily practices of ethnic minorities under illiberal regimes through everyday ethnicity and nationalism approach. At first glance, everyday ethnicity approach seems less vulnerable to the limitations imposed by a non-democratic environment since it assumes that a researcher simply waits till ethnicity becomes relevant in daily routine (Brubaker et al 2006, Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). This assumption is a misconception for several reasons. First, it is difficult to distinguish whether people are following state-initiated patriotic practices forcibly or voluntarily (Goode 2016). Secondly, people are affected by preference falsification to a great extent because of state's forced patriotism.

Another problematic aspect of exploring everyday ethnicity of minorities in a state under authoritarian rule is that the very existence of indigenous ethnic minorities that constitute sub-nations within particular regions of the federation presents a challenge to the integrity of the country (Mylonas 2012) which makes research on minority nationalism a sensitive topic. Similarly, migrant laborers, often Muslims, are accused by the regime as one of the 'enemies' of the state. This is a strategy for seeking legitimacy for increasing securitization as the state presents itself as protector of the people from external dangers like terrorism and Islamization that are seen as threats in predominantly non-Muslim societies. This article examines the peculiarities of the insider position of a researcher doing fieldwork on ethnic minorities – understanding their prospects on nationhood and sense of belonging through consideration of quotidian practices and 'talks about the nation'. I will address the issues of influence of local academic agenda on the process of fieldwork, credibility management in a dynamic political environment, research safety and the researcher's reluctant influence on the field.

This paper is based on my research on ethnic minorities in the Russian Federation, a successor of the Soviet Union and its legacy of ethno-federalism and the country which receives the third highest number of migrants[1] in the world. Based on my research experience

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[1] IOM. 2015. Global Migration Trends: Factsheet. URL:
http://publications.iom.int/system/files/global_migration_trends_2015_factsheet.pdf

in several projects (like investigating inter-ethnic solidarity of minority language revitalization activists, minority language attitudes, cultural nationalism of ethnic minorities, everyday patriotism in Russia, transformation of Islamic practices of Muslim migrants in Russia, and interrelations of Islamic revival and everyday ethnicity in Tatarstan), I consider methodological challenges that affect the research on everyday ethnicity of ethnic minorities within a nationalizing authoritarian state as along with possible ways to overcome these difficulties. To address these issues, I use the reflexive approach in ethnographic research (Brewer 2000, Spencer, 2001, Adkins 2002). This approach suggests that researchers should constantly reflect on their own position in the field since gained knowledge 'is situated, is produced from social subjects with varying amounts of capital, located in a nexus of power relations' (Skeggs, 1997: 28). Thus, the position of the researcher as a person with a particular identity and origin is an important part of the process of ethnographic research (Moran-Ellis, 1995; Lumsden 2009) that affects the field and, subsequently, the research outcomes. While Paul Goode (2017) reflected on his experience of being an outsider in researching everyday patriotism in Russia, I will reflect on my position as an insider in the study of ethnic minorities and the position of an outsider in the research on Muslim migrants in Russia.

I will start with reflecting on my own identity and position within the local and national academia, and in the field. In the next section, I will shed light on the interrelations between national and regional academic agendas and the specifics of doing research on sub-national minorities. After that, I will focus on credibility management by an insider-researcher. In the section following, I will consider the sensibility of research and research participants from the ethical perspective. In the last section, I will reflect on a researcher's influence on the field. In conclusion, I sum up the peculiarities of doing research in an authoritarian setting from the insider-researcher perspective.

Self-reflection of my position in the field

There is vast literature on doing ethnography and fieldwork. However, most of it is written from an outsider perspective. While there are some exceptions, like the excellent work, 'Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia' edited by Sarah Turner, which has lent a voice to the experience of research assistants (Turner 2014: 220-240), there is still a dearth of academic reflections by an insider doing ethnography in illiberal settings. But first, the distinction between outsider and insider researchers needs to be

clarified. It has been argued that the dichotomy of insider versus outsider could be misleading since anyone could be an outsider and at the same time an insider by degree in any named group or community (Schatz 2009:7). This distinction repeats the dichotomy of the researcher as a 'stranger' or 'native' ethnographer, which may be vague or fluid (Bayard De Volo 2009: 228-229). Nevertheless, for the analytical purposes of this paper, I adhere to the distinction that an outsider-researcher is someone foreign to the community while an insider-researcher is someone who belongs to the community.

Before turning to the discussion on methodological peculiarities of being an insider-researcher interested in minority issues in illiberal contexts, I must reflect on my identity and position in the field. Being (or, rather, identifying myself and being categorized by others as) ethnic Tatar and bilingual, I grew up in a religious Muslim family in a multiethnic province in the Volga region without any particular ethnic affiliation in its name[2]. This means that I haven't experienced the life representative of a titular ethnic group that includes various practices like education in the Tatar language, official vacations on Muslim holidays, pride of having a head of the region titled President, as well as positive or negative discrimination due to my ethnic identity (until the beginning of my research)[3]. Neither have I witnessed demonstrations for independence in my childhood that took place in some ethnic republics within the newly emerged Russian Federation in the 1990s nor have I done, learnt or experienced many other things that Tatars who live in Tatarstan experience. I believe that being an ethnic Tatar on the one hand and being socialized in a non-ethnic region on the other gave me an advantage in conducting research on everyday ethnicity in the ethnic republic of Tatarstan that was my main field site. I am an outsider in Tatarstan although, according to the international scholarly community, I am an insider because I have a Russian citizenship and, more importantly, Russian education and academic socialization. I also integrated into the Russian academia through a teaching position at Kazan University for several years and the position of Research Fellow in an academic institution in Moscow.

In this paper I argue that autocracy affects academic research, which, consequently, affects the process of the ethnographic fieldwork. This chain of relations makes it essential to provide a brief description of the current situation in the Russian academia. I graduated from

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[2] There are several ethnic republics in contemporary Russian Federation in which non-Russian ethnic minorities constitute titular population and have special cultural rights (until recently).

[3] I do not consider here structural discrimination, but discrimination on the everyday level.

the European University at Saint-Petersburg that is oriented towards the international scholarly community and has internationally renowned research centers with high-profile academicians. The university offers several educational programs based on the European system of education. It differs a lot from other universities in the Russian Federation but what is the most important for this article is that I was free to choose any research topic or approach I wanted[4]. Moreover, after defending my doctoral thesis I was honored to be offered a position in Kazan in the one of three regional centers established by the European University in 2011 with the financial support of the Open Society Foundation. Again, I was free to pursue any research as there was no need to apply for funding since the European University at Saint-Petersburg had allocated all necessary funds while establishing these regional centers. My only obligations were to produce high quality academic publications that would be valuable on the international level and to design courses for and teach MA students. After some time, however, our center in Kazan was shut down[5] and soon after the Open Society Foundation was declared an undesirable organization in Russia. These events put me in the position of an ordinary Russian scholar who did not have the privilege of a Western-style research support. In order to maintain research independence, I applied for various grants including regional, federal and international. These experiences have influenced the insider perspective that I am sharing through this article and are extremely relevant to the issues I will discuss later.

Finally, I will consider three particular issues that lack reflection in the literature on methodology of everyday ethnicity and fieldwork in illiberal settings: peculiarities of being a homegrown social researcher studying sensitive topics on ethnicity and nationalism in the autocratic context, difficulties of accessing everyday routine of ethnic minorities, and researcher's partisanship and influence on the field.

Minority studies under authoritarianism and specifics of being insider-researcher
Conducting social research in the authoritarian context involves many challenges (Goode & Ahram 2016). Although there are some reflections on being a foreign social researcher in authoritarian countries, there is a lack of discussion about what it means to be a homegrown

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[4] Of course, this was limited to theories or approaches I was taught. Also, see more on specifics of European University at Saint-Petersburg in Kondakov A. 2016. Teaching Queer Theory in Russia/ QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking, 3(2)

[5] Through the termination of support of the EuSPb but it still functions at the university in which it was based under the same title with completely different employees and research agenda.

social researcher in that context (see, for example Glasius, et al. 2017). How does authoritarianism affect the questions local social researchers ask, the methodology they choose and their reflections on their position in the field in general?

According to Goode and Ahram, there are two power differentials that define research in authoritarian regimes, while one of them lies between the scholar and research subjects, the other exists within the scholarly community itself:

> It is defined by institutionalization of disciplinary norms and standards that prioritize certain kinds of research in certain kinds of places, while marginalizing other techniques and other geographic foci. Without such a reflexive assessment, scholars risk becoming partisans, for example, by presenting one-sided data drawn only from opposition figures or unintentionally replicating the agendas of state agencies or nongovernmental organizations (2016: 828)

I would add that this institutionalization of norms increases self-censorship of homegrown researchers which results in them often choosing lesser politically dangerous topics and, simultaneously, the most financially profitable ones. The last issue is of particular importance, because it differs from rationalization of the same scholars in other political settings. Authoritarianism restricts participation of independent actors in social research. Moreover, some university professors assume the role of intellectual police and provide scholarly justifications for the repressive initiatives of the government (Kondakov 2016: 109). As a result, the government becomes the primary source of funding for most of social research that is carried out making it the main client of almost any research institution and giving it the power to set a specific research agenda. Coercive and restrictive role of the government in illiberal settings makes a big difference in the same situation (government-dependency of social sciences) in liberal democracies for two major reasons. First, while dependency on financial support from the government is not unusual for liberal democracies either, the scale of dependency and the stakes involved is different. The variety of actors in the field of social sciences in liberal democracies might be limited but they still exist. Public discourse that affect the research agenda in liberal democracies is also more diverse. Second, despite the fact that governments in liberal democracies tend to be populist nowadays, this populism has a different nature in autocratic regimes. Autocracies have a need to legitimise the regime's securitisation while governments in liberal democracies try to gain more votes.

This often means a diversification of support for social research in the latter and a limitation of funding to security-oriented projects alone in the former.

Recent adoption of the law on undesirable organizations and foreign agents[6] in Russia is the best example of how other actors/clients could be dismissed from the field of social research (Romanov & Iarskaia-Smirnova 2015). Thus, some research topics are rarely addressed by scholars since there is no financial support for such research. Since there is a general limitation of financial support for social sciences from the government, most social researchers are forced to conduct research on only few particular topics that the state is interested in. Recent research by Mihay Lazar and Ekaterina Streltsova on government grant receivers in Russia confirms that mainstream research applications for state funding are more successful than non-mainstream topics (Lazar & Streltsova 2015: 44).

The second boundary of the scope of available research topics is an exclusion of topics, the 'digging' of which could illuminate unsightly consequences of authoritarianism. While migration is among the most well-financed research topics, research on internal ethnic minorities lack federal government funding and, consequently, researchers' attention (Alòs-i-Font 2015). The same situation is observed in Chinese scholarship on ethnicity and religion (Reny 2016, 916). This situation of limited topics supported by governmental funding results in a decline of research on minorities nationalism in the nationalizing authoritarian state and causes mechanisms of surveillance that affect insider researchers as I will show below while discussing the confusion of quotidian and scientific meanings of the term 'nationalism' in local academia.

Another issue that limits the questions asked is the fact that some aspects of people's life almost disappear from public discussions making them seem irrelevant. The field of sociology of ethnicity is a good example. After Vladimir Putin came to power, ethnic policy has been reduced step by step (Rutland 2010). Instead, the policy towards cultural homogenization of the Russian citizens has started taking effect (Laruelle 2009, Goode 2016, Kolsto & Blakkisrud 2015). Some of my senior colleagues from the Russian academia have asked me when commenting on my drafts of grant applications: why do you want to study something that does not exist? Living outside of ethnic republics they get their information

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[6] A Russian bill enabling the government to designate any organization receiving funding from abroad and carrying out political activity as a 'foreign agent' passed quickly through parliament and was signed by President Vladimir Putin on November 25, 2017.

from Russian media: specific everyday practices of ethnic minorities do not exist in modern Russia, all pathetic remains of Soviet ethnic policies that still exist are songs and dances in traditional costumes performed during annual festivals.

Formulating a research question itself is a political exercise since it is affected by the way we perceive the world in every context (Green, 1993). The formulation of the research question could also reveal a lot about the context itself in the authoritarian case. As Ahram and Goode highlighted: 'research on authoritarianism is deeply affected by positioning in matrices of national and personal identity, professional and institutional priorities, and agendas of coercive and social power. Appreciating these relationships is crucial for understanding how we came to know what we know about authoritarianism' (2016, 835). Although the limitations on the variety of public discourses on certain topics or the marginalization of particular discussions exist in any society, the crucial difference of authoritarian regimes is that these limits are enforced coercively. It has been observed that ethnic and religious cleavages in society are usually red lines (that is, issues that are too dangerous to be discussed publicly) in authoritarian regimes (Glasius, et al. 2017: 39). Thus, the national and local research agenda on ethnicity and nationalism in illiberal societies is strictly framed by preferences of the main client – the state.

Additionally, for the purposes of this article it is important to briefly describe the situation in the studies of ethnicity within the ethnic republics of the Russian Federation that has its own important specifics. In ethnic republics there is a demand on studies of contemporary ethnic culture that aims at legitimization of the maintenance of the special status by 'titular' ethnic groups. This demand is initiated by ethnic elites who hold significant sway over regional governments. Thus, most of the local scholars conduct research mainly on ethnicities that are considered titular in an ethnic region or on 'peaceful coexistence' of various ethnicities in a given republic. This kind of research often repeats the logic of censorships of the federal government: it serves the construction of particular discourses and ignorance of others. Of course, this description is oversimplified and there are a few researchers who do conduct research on less mainstream topics, including tricky ones, and provide different perspectives of the observed social processes. However, there are only few of them and they cannot influence the aforementioned general tendencies which, in the long run, influence and alter the research process itself. Researchers who conduct research on tricky or risky topics rarely publish their research. A crucial outcome of this situation that influences the process of

research is one-sided vision that affects the sociological imagination of a homegrown social researcher, especially the kind of questions, cases and methodology she chooses. This is specific to the insider-researcher, because in most cases she or he has linguistic limitations. While outsider-researchers have access to the academic literature on various topics in other languages written by their international colleagues who are relatively free to publish the outcomes of their research, local researchers usually face financial, organizational, social and linguistic limitations to access this literature. As Alos-i-Font has shown, Chuvash regional researchers tend to cite their colleagues from Moscow and St. Petersburg rather than researchers from the same region or other regions of the Russian Federation or from international publications (Alòs-i-Font 2015).

Interviews of local experts have revealed that sometimes their narratives and the experts' evaluations become a manifestation of the positive image of the region, and an open discussion of sensitive topics becomes difficult because of their methodological nationalism (Goode & Stroup 2015, p. 7). On the other hand, this strategy is understandable: local social researchers are responsible for the construction of the image of their republics and, thus, federal policies for these republics. Thus, for an outsider researcher who is a newcomer to the field (someone foreign to the particular ethnic region or foreign to the country), all this creates additional obstacles. Regional researchers advise as suggestions several well-known cases that represent the best examples of the positive processes in the region and ignore less positive but, arguably, more common ones. For example, the mosque 'Yardam' ('The help') in Kazan, which offers rehabilitation facilities for blind people, appears in the narratives of local experts not as an example of 'social Islam' or as an example of 'Tatar Muslim charity organization' but as an example of a regular mosque despite the fact that it is in fact an exception to other numerous mosques in Kazan. The reason for this also lies in another trait of social research in the authoritarian context: total alarmization of some spheres of life like the Muslim religious life in Russia. As a consequence, workers of this particular mosque are aware of their responsibility of constructing a positive image of Tatar Islam and have become used to giving interviews to media and social scholars, thus becoming 'professional informants'. Whereas workers of other mosques are always under control of security services, which is why their willingness to participate in any social research is reduced to almost zero. Of course, state control leads to preference falsification by research participants which is a common characteristic of any authoritarian context (Goode and Ahram 2016: 825-826). This

problem is not specific to the insider-researcher. However, the methodological nationalism of his or her colleagues might affect the insider-researcher too, especially if her position in local (or national) academia depends on professional evaluations of these colleagues.

Nationalism studies in the authoritarian context is a peculiar field of research that is restricted by two barriers. One of them is that in an authoritarian context some academic terms are not only often confused with their misconceived meanings but also avoided by local academics. The word 'nationalism' is the best example of it (Goode 2017), especially when used along with words like 'minority'. Once I had presented a paper titled 'Bottom–up Minority Nationalism of Cultural Virtuosos in Russia: Individual Strategies and Collective Attitudes' in an international conference at Cambridge University. Not long after the conference, the head of my department of the university where I worked at that time emailed me with the request to send her the text of the presentation as soon as possible. She explained that the Vice-Rector of the university had asked her to present my work for his evaluation because there was a possibility that I may have put the long-established peace in the republic in danger by researching (and, more importantly, by presenting abroad) such a question as nationalism of the titular group. After submitting the text and a long cover letter about the scientific meaning of the term 'nationalism' in my research, I was not contacted again. However, I was warned that I should not use these terms in the titles of my presentations again – just to be safe. This situation shows that the confusion of the categories of practices with the categories of analysis (Brubaker 2004) makes some research topics difficult to deal with for the sake sanctions for universities' employees and poses the risk of not just losing a job but to be imprisoned for 'putting the long-established peace in the republic in danger' under the federal law on incitement of ethnic hatred. Moreover, it demonstrates the decentralized surveillance of sensitive subjects perceived as politically dangerous; insider-researchers are especially sensitive to this surveillance since they are dependent on local academic institutions. But there is also another side of the coin that creates the next methodological problem: all this raises specific difficulties in getting access to the field.

Credibility management by insider-researcher

Access to the field for ethnographic research is a challenge in itself in any context. There are many difficulties a researcher faces while negotiating access to entering privileged communities (Lundstrom 2010) or to be accepted for conducting research while doing 'underdog' sociology (Lumsden 2009). Again, at first glance, everyday ethnicity approach

implies that conducting ethnography does not require any special permission: the researcher focuses on situational identifications that come up spontaneously or everyday practices that are difficult to hide since they are mundane and very rarely specific. Is this the case for doing ethnography in the nationalizing authoritarian context that present-day Russia represents? Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016) have noted that access to the field is characterized by its fluidity, temporality and political process that requires sensitivity to social issues and to potential ethical choices faced by both researcher and researched. The decisions that researchers make during negotiating access to the field have consequences in terms of further relationships with research participants, researcher's sense of self, his or her personal integrity and credibility and the ability to publish his or her work at the end (Ibid: 555). What are the most critical political and ethical issues of getting access to everyday practices of ethnic minorities in the case of authoritarian context for an insider-researcher?

In his study of everyday nationalism of the Russian ethnic majority, Paul Goode argues that their privately-held sense of patriotism is deeply personal and apolitical (Goode 2016, 446). But how do ethnic minorities react to the current nationalizing processes in Russia? Both the alarmization of some spheres of life and the limitations of research funding to support only a few directions, sometimes, result in a particular presentation of research outcomes as alarming, which could potentially start another vicious circle. Often social researchers publish the outcomes of their research in the media to get public attention, but sometimes it could hardly be called 'public sociology'. In the situation of a lack of social research funding, it is important to get public attention to particular academic topics in order to prove to federal granting committees that these research topics are worth further analysis and, hence, require funding. Often the easiest way to prove that a topic is important is presenting it as a potentially danger to the very existence of the state. For example, potential violent conflict or the possible rise of any kind of extremism. There are several public 'experts' who do 'research' on Wahhabism in Tatarstan and, as outcome of such research, write numerous articles in local newspapers and online media platforms about the spread of Wahhabism, terrorism and Salafists–regional government syndicate. It is perhaps a strategy to get governmental funding since authoritarian state can conveniently legitimize its securitization and social control through this kind of research and, especially, through such outcomes. Let us consider the case of a very famous 'expert on Islamic radicalism, Islamic extremism and the researcher of ethno-religious conflicts in the Volga region of the Russian Federation' (as a

Wikipedia page states[7]), Rais Suleimanov, who worked for the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), an organization supported by the federal government, for a long time. He has published numerous articles in the local media and in an academic journal (which was established by himself) on the spread of Wahhabism, terrorism and relevant phenomena in the Volga region of the Russian Federation. For purposes of this paper, it is important to reflect on how such publications in the media by an 'expert' or a 'social researcher' affect access to the field for conducting ethnographic research. Most outcomes of social research are hidden from ordinarily people (especially in the authoritarian context) primarily because they are published in academic journals that only academics read or because they are meant only for policy making. However, sometimes research outcomes, as I have mentioned above, are purposely presented for the general public. Alternatively, there is a tendency in the Russian media to employ pseudo-experts who repeat the official line of the state (Goode 2016, p. 426). All these nuances create a paradox: apolitical topics of research like people's everyday practices could become highly politicized, especially from the point of view of research participants. This happens, first and foremost, in conducting interviews including nation-talks and talks about the nation but also in their actual everyday practices like private holiday celebrations, worship or other kind of gatherings. Every representative of any ethnic minority – including regime loyalists in the republics – feels the pressure of censorship due to the alarming media environment and the state's policies on total securitization. Thus, the domain of everyday ethnicity of non-Russian ethnic groups as well as marginalized low-skilled migrant laborers has become difficult to access for the insider-researcher. In this regard, the access to some research fields or social groups is easier for outsider-researchers who usually have a Western background and are considered 'civilized' or representatives of a liberal world and not a coercive state.

To illustrate this, I will provide two examples from my fieldwork. The first concerns my research experience of studying migrants. There is a popular discourse in the Russian media about the dangers that migrant laborers from Central Asia bring to Russia: the high degree of criminality which is associated with them, their association with religious radicalism and, thus, with terrorism, and paranoia regarding health concerns, destruction of culture and job losses caused apparently by such migrants.

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[7]From his Wikipedia page URL: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Сулейманов,_Раис_Равкатович (accessed on 22.03.17).

In this context I had once conducted an interview on transformation of religious practices of Muslim migrants in Russia. My interlocutor was one of the religious leaders of the Tajik diaspora who held the position of an advisor on migrants' affairs in the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Tatarstan.

After a few biographical questions which went quite well (he answered all questions in detail), I started asking about the specifics of religious celebration in the community.

> Researcher: How are you going to celebrate Uraza-Bairam? Do you plan to do something special for the Tajik diaspora?

> Respondent: We are not a Wahhabis, you know. We will celebrate it like anybody else.
> Researcher: Yes, I do know. I mean, will it be a special gathering of diaspora people, what are you going to cook?

> Respondent: We are not a Wahhabis, you know. We will celebrate it like anybody else. Nothing special.

> Researcher: Do you plan special charity actions?

> Respondent: I told you, we will do it like anybody else.

It was one of the most difficult interviews of my professional life. He repeated the same and the only idea to most of the similar *open* questions: Muslim Tajiks are not Wahhabists, they do not deal in drugs and do not participate in extremist activities. It felt like we were in a police station, I was a policeman and he wanted to assure me that he had not committed a crime.

After several efforts to continue this conversation on the topic of everyday life I was about leave disappointed, when he suddenly asked me:

> Respondent: Do you have a profile on Vkontakte?
> Researcher: Yes, I have.
> Respondent: Please let me know how could I find you there?

Although he never added me as a friend in this popular Russian social network site, he called me himself after a week and invited me for a second interview. This conversation happened not long after the incident of the prosecution of the aforementioned researcher, Rais

Suleimanov[8], that was discussed in the media. At that time, being a relatively new researcher in the area, my questions were initially reluctantly answered by this research participant who was wary of researchers like Rais Suleimanov (as he told me later). Although he never mentioned my social network profile as a reason for making up his mind to contact me again, he said 'I have asked about you, we can talk one more time.' While Eleonor Knott noticed (2019) that sometimes researcher establish contacts with research participants in advance, before entering the field, I would like to point out another side of this coin: research participants also use social networking sites to monitor and evaluate the researcher. While this could concern both insider-researchers and outsider-researchers, the latter can manage their profiles in social networks of a country of their professional interest without sacrificing much of their personal connections. On the contrary, insider-researchers cannot control their profiles for the sake of access to the field – their private and professional lives are a part of national networking sites.

Another example I would like to mention is from my research of 'ethnic and religious risks in the republic' funded by the regional government, and, curiously, conducted by a research organization that was not based in the region – probably for the sake of unbiased research outcomes. After a biographical interview with one research participant I started to ask his prospects on the development of Tatar ethnicity:

> Respondent: I see this development right now. Especially last four-five years. Sorry, I forgot, again, who ordered this research? I mean federal or local [officials] interested?
> Researcher: It is the local government but a group of researchers from St. Petersburg will analyze it.
> Respondent: OK. Maybe I should not tell you this, but I have noticed from your Vkontakte profile that you are already familiar with all this stuff. Maybe you should switch off your recorder for a while?

He then shared his opinion on the revival of the Tatar ethnic culture and his observations on everyday life like the increasing use of the Tatar language in the streets, strengthening of ethnic identification among the younger generation and so on: nothing explicitly political.
Both examples show that everyday routine of ethnic minorities have become an alarming topic, but also that researchers' profiles on social networking sites play a key role for gaining access to the field. The habit of policing and monitoring as well as filtering the information

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[8] URL: http://www.msk.kp.ru/daily/26481/3352198/ Accede 04.04.2017

provided by the interlocutor are natural consequences of living in the authoritarian context since the regime promotes a hypocritical understanding of freedom of speech. A researcher's online social profile becomes a source of information for research participants and, thus, a source of evaluation of the credibility of the researcher. In most cases, based on the information from the Internet, research participants evaluate and decide to what extent they can be open with the researcher and filter the topics they are ready to discuss. Language plays a significant role here. There is more information in local languages about an insider-researcher than about an outsider-researcher. An insider-researcher may appear more trustworthy if the information complies with the expectations from a good researcher in the view of the potential research participant or may seem less reliable if this information leads to the opposite assumptions. Thus, recruiting research participants from digital social networks could be a better way to access the field in an autocratic context for insider-researchers. But this phenomenon also has consequences for private life of researchers: work penetrates the researcher's non-working space since the researcher is forced to censor his or her own posts on digital social networks for the sake of good impression on potential research participants and to avoid situations which could lead to a negative impression.

Sensibility of research participants and researcher's ethics

The idea that 'investigating authoritarian regimes, similar to investigating countries in the midst of civil war, forces difficult choices upon the researchers about personal safety of informants' (Goode and Ahram 2016: 828) becomes especially relevant since the law is manipulated by the powerful elites in protecting the regime's agents rather than protecting citizens. In the Russian Federation two laws were adopted that restrict the respondents in their answers and the researcher with a selection of questions she may ask in the study of everyday ethnicity of ethnic minorities. These include the law on criminal liability for incitement to separatism adopted on 23 December 2013 and the multiple amendments to the law on criminal responsibility for crimes related to extremist activities from 2013 onwards. These trends in Russian law-making continued with 'Yarovaya Package' adopted on July 2016, which is officially designed to provide additional measures to counteract terrorism and

ensure public safety but are considered by international human rights organizations as tools for imposing new restrictions on liberties in Russia[9].

As Arpad Szakolczai has noted: ...

> the very existence of such minorities as minorities, often quite isolated and embittered minorities, is a consequence of long-term historical changes, mostly due to the building and collapse of empires. This implies, at a first step, the rise of a conquering empire, and its subjugation of various people, often involving forced population movements and then a protracted existence under such an empire that often can extend for long centuries, under which various efforts are made by central authorities to integrate and assimilate the conquered; eventually, the necessary collapse of an empire might lead to situations of nation-state-building with its own homogenizing efforts as a legacy. (2017,3)

This is very true for contemporary Russia and its ethnic minorities considering the current nationalizing efforts of the power elite. The status of an outsider-researcher brings dual advantage in this situation: the abilities to create space for asking potentially challenging questions by posing as ignorant and to encourage perception of harmlessness (Goode 2017). Such advantages are denied to insider-researchers since it is assumed that she is more familiar with the current law enforcement than the research participants themselves. Considering the aforementioned restrictive legislation, asking questions to seek clarification could very often be an ethical issue. Usually, I prefer not to clarify a respondent's answer if I assume that he or she hints that something may be potentially dangerous to reveal. This confirms Paul Goode's thesis that the insider position is more ethically vulnerable for research on everyday nationalism in a security-conscious regime than the position of an outsider.

In the next interview extract the respondent talks about the asymmetric system of ethnofederalism in the Soviet Union in which some of the fifteen Union republics had autonomous republics within themselves that subordinated directly to the Central Committee – the ruling government of the USSR. The Russian Soviet Socialist Republic included sixteen autonomous republics that were subordinated directly to the Soviet Union ruling committee

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[9] Overview of the Package of Changes into a Number of Laws of the Russian Federation Designed to Provide for Additional Measures to Counteract Terrorism URL: http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Russia/Yarovaya.pdf accede on 28.03.2017

(Slezkin 1994). The Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic – now the Republic of Tatarstan – was one of them. After the collapse of the USSR fifteen republics became independent states while autonomous republics have continued being autonomous regions within these newly emerged states. The respondent in his narrative refers to this as an injustice.

> 'Well, I was interested in history, and the moment that territories of Finland had become suddenly alien for us has always seemed unfair to me. Russia and Finland quickly become alien countries, some sort of enemies to each other. There were some other territories, on the contrary, which were not given even an opportunity to develop their own written language, their own culture, and then it was said [to them]: 'You are the North, you are the Far East…' This inequality has always seemed to me as unjust as the Soviet Union disintegration itself… I mean the separation into the union and the autonomous republics was unjust and the parts on which the Soviet Union disintegrated… it seems as unfair for me'. (20 June 2016)

On 28 December 2013 the Russian Parliament adopted a new law[10] according to which any 'public claims for the implementation of actions aimed at violating the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation' is a criminal offence that made certain kinds of nation-talks sensitive or even dangerous. I have decided not to ask clarifying questions about this complaint for the sake of safety of the research participant and to maintain the perception of harmlessness. Initially I had two choices: to ask further questions about what exactly is disappointing in this unfair disintegration or to let the research participant continue his narrative and not return to this topic. I chose the latter option because I did not want to change the atmosphere of the interview from relaxing to alarming. A question like 'what result of the disintegration would be fair to you?' could have been provocative in this context. He could not say anything about the possibility of Tatarstan's independence even if he meant it since it could be treated as a claim for separatism. This potential question became meaningless and could have been misleading because the research participant could have taken steps to level the idea expressed accidentally. Broaching sensitive topics in the interview on everyday nationalism of ethnic minorities is dangerous in two ways: it makes research participants vulnerable and could mislead the researcher.

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[10] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation Article 280.1

Another problem is the fine line between sensitive topics and non-sensitive ones. Since the research focus is daily life, it is up to the researcher to decide which topics are sensitive and which are not. The red lines, or the topics that are highly politically sensitive, may be hard or fluid, depending on the context (Glasius et al 2018). Sometimes there is no social consensus on the red lines and it can make the researcher paranoid. At times I was afraid to ask questions to avoid the risk of compromising the atmosphere and bringing an end to the interview. Moreover, there is a common fear among ordinary citizens that more restrictive legislation might be adopted in the future. This uncertainty causes fear of free expression like the discussion of fascism in the example below:

> Respondent: ...The way of modernization, which is chosen by Tatarstan and is chosen by Russia, the so-called third way for corporate states, and I am not pronouncing here another word that begins with F… but I mean as the European states at 1920s – 1930s years…
>
> Researcher: And why do not you want to pronounce the word that begins with F?
>
> Respondent: because then my words make a political context. And there will be very difficult to prove anything wrong.
>
> Researcher: That is, the fear...
>
> Respondent: Well, I am afraid, of course, yes.
>
> Researcher: Could one be imprisoned for this?
>
> Respondent: Well, not yet so far, from a purely formal point of view, but one of the deputies of the State Duma, he proposes to criminalize public comparison of Russia and Nazi Germany. Now then…'

And he continued without letting me interrupt and ask questions.

Sensibility of research participants is always a crucial issue even in the study of ordinary people's perceptions since the application of law in Russia is unpredictable and has been used by the regime for random exemplary punishment of people who show certain kinds of opposition. This treatment is meted out to not just public figures but specifically to ordinar y people. Everyone is afraid that a sword of Damocles is hanging over him since the Russian Parliament constantly adopts new legislation and it is popularly believed that the activities and public statements that are allowed for now can be criminalized tomorrow. Thus, voice recordings are perceived as a possible source of danger in the future, because, as one of

research participant said, 'One can think all out of it when it will be needed, and then you cannot prove anything wrong.'

Why could anonymity of research participants not serve as a guarantee of their security? In fact, it could easily serve as a warranty of their security as there is no requirement for social researchers to provide the audio files of interviews to anybody else if research ethics are observed. However, it is not always perceived as a sufficient warranty by research participants themselves. This could be due to many factors starting from communicative and cultural memory about Stalinism and peoples' fear of contemporary possibilities of cyber-surveillance. Nevertheless, perpetual uncertainty, especially in the legal sphere, requires additional steps for the protection of the respondent's views. Consequently, people sometimes reject being recorded and talk more freely if they are not recorded. This is especially the case for Muslim migrants in Russia. Most of the research participants I have interviewed for our research on social remittances in religion (Yusupova, Ponarin 2017) refused to be recorded although some of them were documented migrants who do not practice Islam regularly and were not interested in religion in general. 'Just in case' was the reason I was often given.

My profile as a representative of an ethnic minority has helped me in the cases when research participants chose strategies of 'just in case' to defend themselves. Here my ethnic identity served the same role as that of gendered identities in some gender-sensitive research: research participants evaluate the ethnographer first and foremost in terms of her gender identity (Lumsden 2009: 498). As Karen Lumsden puts it: 'Hence, as ethnographers, it is important that we reflect upon our social background since it directly impacts on our position in the field and, thus, our relationship with the researched' (2009, p. 502). Agata Lisiak argues that not just gender but also class and ethnic characteristics of a researcher's identity can cause influence on the field: 'Researchers' performances in the field are gendered, classed, and ethnicized. We are watched and judged by our respondents based on how we look, what we say, and how we say it' (Lisiak 2015: 1). I would add that ethnicity- and religion-sensitive research participants related to me first and foremost in terms of my ethnic and religious identity respectively. It was always important for them to know that I am Muslim myself or if I speak my mother-tongue.

In the case of research on Russian ethnic minorities, bilingualism is a form of self-protection to avoid the dangers of uncertainty. When they perceive or anticipate some danger,

respondents switch the language of conversation to their less-used native one. This strategy of switching is important additional information for the researcher: it indicates that from this moment on the research participant considers his narrative as sensitive and potentially dangerous. While younger people do not tend to switch the language of conversation, the older ones do it often. I assume this is not simply because it is much easier for the latter to talk in their native language, since – as I have noticed in my experience – interviews always start in Russian and continue in Russian until the discussion of certain sensitive topics start.

The younger people usually choose another strategy: they refuse to answer the question directly but do so demonstratively, such that this demonstrativeness itself could serve as a source of information. For example, I did not receive a clear answer to my question: 'How has your communication with the Crimean Tatars changed after the well-known events?" Instead I was offered an emotional reaction: "I will not discuss this topic. Better ask the older generation, the younger generation has its own and different position. The Crimean Tatar Youth activists do not respect us. And I can understand why. That is all I can say'. This kind of an emotional refusal can be quite common and the deductive method of 'read between the lines' is needed for analysis as Paul Goode and David Stroup (2015) have proposed in their methodological article. The problem with this self-protection strategy employed by research participants is that after the refusal to answer potentially sensitive questions often make it difficult to continue the interview. The researcher must be flexible and must constantly evaluate the potential danger and sensitivity of his or her questions during an interview and rewrite the questionnaire as many times as may be needed during the fieldwork. Being a social researcher in challenging settings demands mastering the art of balancing sensitive and potentially sensitive questions. If excessive caution results in losing important narratives, touching potentially sensitive topics could result in the termination of the interview.

Another strategy for obtaining data on sensitive and potentially sensitive topics like nation-talks of ethnic minorities is cyclical talking on the same issues with the same research participants (read more on cyclical talks as a method in Lillis 2008). As everyday ethnicity approach implies sensitivity to certain contexts and situations, cyclical talks are especially relevant to this approach since 'things can only be said at certain moments, under certain conditions. Likewise, and as a correlate of this, some things can only be researched at certain moments and under certain conditions' (Blommaert 2005, 65). This strategy is helpful not only for obtaining better trust but also for a better reliability of the data. In the complex

context of the Russian system of declared federalism along with the current nationalizing policy mixed with legacies of the Soviet system of ethnofederalism, research participants very often narrate oppositional or mutually exclusive understanding of their national belonging and the importance of ethnic identification (Yusupova 2018). Precisely for the possibility of this cyclical interviewing I was very careful about asking potentially sensitive topics during first meetings.

Once trust is obtained, at times the researcher is treated by research participants as a tool for advancing certain goals of social group under study. The flipside of this coin is a partisanship of the researcher himself or herself. As Karen Lumsden argues, 'social researchers will inevitably 'take sides' whether or not they are willing to admit so… value neutrality is an impossible goal, particularly in research of a political nature' (2013, 1). In the section below, I will discuss these issues more elaborately.

Partisanship and influence on the field

This paper is based mostly on two research experiences: studying Muslim migrants in Russia and everyday ethnicity in Tatarstan. In the first case I was perceived by research participants as a representative of a different ethnicity (my Russian citizenship and titular ethnicity in the republic of Tatarstan both have been considered by research participants as possessions related to a dominant group) that dominates, and sometimes discriminates against, the marginal immigrant ethnic groups that that research participant represents. In the second research project I was perceived as a representative of the same ethnicity, which functioned as a resource of obtaining additional credibility as a person who shares the same experience of discrimination from an authoritarian nationalizing state.

In both cases my position as a social researcher as against the discredited position of a journalist was an important first step towards obtaining credibility. Discrediting the profession of journalism is another feature of authoritarian regimes, and it affects conducting social research as well. The difference between a social researcher and a journalist is rarely understood by research participants clearly. Thus, a research interview seems to similar to a journalistic interview. This is why the researcher must explain the reason and the general context of the research as fully as he or she can before asking the first question. In this situation a foreign researcher is on the same stage as a native one (cf. Goode 2016, p. 426). However, another methodological problem comes up: how to not affect the answers by this

preamble. This is very thin ice which could ruin the whole idea of the interview considering that the specifics of everyday ethnicity approach aims to avoid direct emphasis on ethnicity by researchers themselves. One of the ways to solve this problem is highlighting the professional self-representation of the researcher. I used to describe my previous research to research participants to assure them of my professionalism as a social researcher. Moreover, as I have mentioned earlier, very often research participants search for information about the researcher in online social networks before they consent to be interviewed. It is precisely for these reasons that I have created a professional blog in the Russian language where I discuss various topics on nationalism studies that are not directly related to my own research, and where I write in a journalistic style. The link to this blog is provided in all my profiles on social networking sites, which helps me to create reliability. For example, one of the research participants in my ongoing research – who has now become a guide to my fieldwork in Chuvashia – agreed to assist me because, as she said, 'I have read your blog, I feel like we have much in common!'.

Why do I discuss these issues in the section of partisanship? Because since credibility is obtained, this association of the researcher with a journalist results in a tricky situation: research participants ask you to raise those sensitive topics in the media which they had raised during the interview. Once I was talking to a research participant who had a position in an official religious organization for about twenty years and had just started a very successful initiative which had resulted in the rise of prestige of that organization. However, despite his long service and success of the initiative he was at the verge of losing his job during the time the interview was being conducted because of the spread of xenophobia in the Russian society in general and in Islamic religious organizations in particular. After a detailed biographical interview in his office he invited me for the second one in a cafe. 'I will tell you more about the situation of Muslim migrants in general, you will be surprised', he told me. It was not an exceptional case as I have already mentioned above. The second interview took place several hours after in a Turkish café that is famous for its international and Islamic atmosphere: practicing Muslims of various ethnicities gather there. The reasons for this invitation for another interview were both emotional and practical. Through my questions of his biography and daily life I had touched upon sensitive topics that he had never discussed with anybody else before. Some of these topics he wanted to be discussed publicly. So, he started a highly informative narrative and spoke for forty minutes almost without any question from me. At the end he asked me with hope:

'Where will you publish the results of your research? It is important for us, migrants who want to live in this country peacefully, to show how we are discriminated for nothing'

I told him with regret that I was not a journalist, but hopefully scie ntific research was still the basis for policy development, and that perhaps my research could affect policy making. Indeed, after a while I was asked to write a policy paper based on my research on social remittances in religion of Muslim migrants in Russia. Time spent in the field undoubtedly influenced my policy recommendations not just because I had become aware of the specific context of migrants' lives but also because these interviews influenced me emotionally, and that led to partisanship in its turn. While this is an example of a partisanship that is quite a common consequence in any ethnographic research, the next example of partisanship represents a different kind of result of a researcher's engagement with the researched, specifically in authoritarian political settings.

My social profile as a representative of the same ethnic group as my respondents in the research on everyday ethnicity in Tatarstan raises the issue of 'forced partisanship'. By 'forced partisanship' I mean the situation when research participants use your expert knowledge for achieving their own goals despite the researcher's initial will to stay aside. It is different from the term 'going native' but implies the danger of being too involved with the community under study. The difference is in the awareness of this involvement by a researcher, lack of control over the shared expert knowledge and ethical or ideological concerns that raised the issue (for example the desire to transform ideas or practices of the researched group rather than to reproduce them by the researcher herself). To clarify this concept, I will describe another case from my fieldwork.

After being in the field for a while I was contacted via social networking sites by a group of young political entrepreneurs who organized a kind of political club. Although this informal political association was not defined in any ethnic terms and the language of the conversation was Russian, all its members were ethnic Tatars. I agreed to meet and right at the beginning defined my position as a researcher who is interested in this association as a new site of my research and not for a political career opportunity. They agreed to this condition of my participation in their meetings. When I asked them why they had invited me, they answered that my social network profile and the news I repost as well as the comments on my social network page made it clear to them I am a like-minded person who could be trusted and could help to analyze and comment on recent political events, etc. It is well known that one

of the common outcomes of ethnographic research is that while doing fieldwork, the ethnographer may be changed in turn (Golde 1970). My social network profile reflects my personal interest in contemporary Tatar culture and that interest itself has risen from my experience in the field. Although while conducting research I didn't consider it as a tool of obtaining credibility.

As Lumsden and others have pointed out, exiting the field is problematic not just in physical or psychological senses but also emotionally (Lumsden 2013, Coffey 1999). Due to the development of digital technologies it was difficult to leave the field even after keeping spatial and temporal distance from the ethnographic site (Knott 2019). Even after I left the field after several meetings with these young political entrepreneurs for a six-month scholarship abroad, they tried to keep in touch with me via online social networks. Meanwhile they launched a social media platform that introduced their political agenda to a broader audience in the form of news. For this, they consulted with me several times via social networking sites regarding the news they wanted to highlight and discuss on their media platform. After understanding their implicit position on ethnic issues that could lead to negative results in my opinion, I could not hold on my observer position anymore (but not because I wanted to help them: I consciously wanted to change their attitude). I started sending them academic articles that I consider useful for understanding the positive sides of cultural diversity in a republic *especially* from the point of view of their political goals. By doing so, I had in fact become a participant of this circle contrary to my initial will to stand aside. After a while for some reasons they stopped their meetings as well as consultations with me on ethnic affairs. This case illustrates the need to be sensitive and reflexive to the emergent and reciprocal nature of relationships in the field and the possibility of non-linear development of such relationships (Cunliffe & Alcadipani 2016: 555). It also illustrates that researchers can sometimes be involved in collaborations with the researched and initiate its transformation not because he or she sympathizes with the research participants' position during the fieldwork or have an active political position in the field from the beginning (like feminist position in women studies (Rupp and Taylor 2011 for example)). Rather their ethics force them to share critical views on the attitudes of the research participants, especially those who initiate a dialogue and seek expert knowledge on particular questions. It is different from how participants may use researches as political resources (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay 2016) and from the impossibility of controlling participants' future life strategies (Knott

2019). It is also a different type of engagement from partisanship or from 'going native' – it is an engagement in order to change initial ideologies of research participants rather than to serve in favor of them. The consequences of this engagement are uncertain because the researcher has no control over how research participants will react, interpret or use this shared knowledge.

Conclusion

There are three crucial points I would like to highlight in the conclusion. First, the described peculiarities and difficulties of doing ethnographic research on daily lives of ethnic minorities in the authoritarian context make a tradeoff between information and ethics crucial. Moreover, the nature of the regime is altering the directionality between ethics and information. On the one hand, reliability of researcher implies ethics that restrict her to ask provocative questions and, thus, limits the information she can collect. On the other hand, the insider information that she has affects her ethics: the more information she has, the more careful she should be with the researched, the more ethic-sensitive should be her guide for the interview. Naivety that outsider-researchers can adopt does not work in the case of an insider-researcher since, as a member of the same community living under the same context, her position is considered even more responsible for the information collected because her academic background.

Secondly (and consequently), in the situation of continuous enforcement of new restrictive legislation, the reliability of the researcher is becoming crucial for the research, even if the research does not necessarily focus on sensitive topics. Very often research participants feel vulnerable and assume that the narratives they share and their participation in research could become potentially dangerous long after the research was conducted. Thus, they feel the need to monitor researchers' profiles in social networking sites and in the personal evaluation of the researcher's credibility in advance before the interview. Surprisingly, this opens a possibility for the insider-researcher: any information about the researcher in the Internet including profiles in online social networks serve for or against his or her credibility in the eyes of research participants. This is why we should be aware of it and use it as a possibility of introducing ourselves to research participants. This strategy might affect the private life of insider-researchers more than that of outsider-researchers. Outsider-researchers may have a profile in a local social networking sites precisely for the reason of introducing themselves to potential participants and colleagues in the field-site, while having private profiles elsewhere.

This is not the case for local researchers who have to manage their professional and private lives within the local settings.

Finally, authoritarianism is characterized by the limitation of public discourses on and by ethnic minorities as well as limitations on research funding and academic literature. Such limitations affect the research being done. Sometimes the research participants try to use the researcher for highlighting their problems or *their* existence *per se* in public discourse. Sometimes they use the researcher's unique knowledge for achieving their own goals. In this situation a 'forced partisanship' may take place when the researcher cannot control the knowledge she shares with the research participants and the extent of her natural, sometimes unavoidable, intentions to influence the field.

Overall, authoritarian context calls for a revision of methodology for research on everyday ethnicity in the case of ethnic minorities and a necessity for an insider-researcher to be simultaneously reflexive and ethically sensitive every moment before, while and after doing ethnographic fieldwork.

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