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Minority political participation under majority domination: a case study of Russia's Republic of Mari El

The paper will study ethnic politics in the Republic of Mari El throughout the post-Soviet period in order to explore the phenomenon of ethnic political participation in the republics of Russia. The paper will start with examining the patterns of ethnic political participation in regions in their connection to methods of diversity management. Next, the paper will present a case study on ethnic aspects of politics in the Republic of Mari El with a focus on party politics and personalized politics. Finally, the paper will analyse the developments that contributed to the establishment of the system of ethnic domination and backed some ethnic political participation in this republic.

I. Introduction

Political participation of national minorities in public life enhances their inclusion in multinational and multiethnic societies and is one of the preconditions for good governance (Weller 2010). A democratic state typically guarantees, among others, the right of persons belonging to national minorities to determine their ethnic identity and the right to participate in managing state affairs directly or through their representatives (see articles 3 and 15, Framework Convention). Effective participation of minorities can be ensured through establishing guarantees and mechanisms for their participation in the political life of mainstream society as well as through territorial and non-territorial arrangements of self-governance. One possible territorial solution is the creation of ethnic regions where citizens belonging to a minority form a regional majority and by virtue of this fact can manage public affairs and exercise authority over matters that affect them.

The Russian federal system included some ethnically based federation units. Hereinafter this study uses the term 'ethnic political participation' and not 'minority political participation', because, according to the Russian legislation, the country's traditional ethnic groups are not categorized as 'national minorities' but as 'titular peoples' in their 'ethnic homelands', i.e. having regions 'titled' after them and historically created by exercise of their right to national self-determination. Since the Soviet times, the borders of territorial units have remained largely unchanged despite the changed ethnic situations, wherein the titular groups in many ethnically based regions have remained in the numerical minority.

Democratic procedures were supposed to ensure political participation of all social groups, including ethnic groups. However, ethnic candidates in the regions with titular minorities began to be outvoted in the elections held under the majoritarian rule and to lose their public offices, which was a break with the Soviet legacy of proportional representation. In the public discourse, ethnic elites raised the problem

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of low political participation of the titular and other groups. The failure of democratization and establishment of authoritarian regimes first in some regions and later in Russia as a whole aggravated the problem to the extent that ethnic elites in some regions were marginalized. In ethnic regions, the largest ethnic group, Russian or titular, tended to be overrepresented in power structures (see Golosov 2014). Why was this so?

‘Ethnic federalism’ in Russia has been the subject of numerous studies that have often focused on exploration of power sharing between the centre and regions, or of regional self-governance; arrangements of minority participation in decision-making at the federal level have sometimes been in focus, but minority participation at the regional level has only rarely received scholarly attention. The purpose of this study is, in a case study of one republic of Russia, to explore the country's methods for diversity management.

In its first part, the paper will discuss the methods used therein to study ethnic political participation and outline a conceptual model that links the patterns of participation at the regional level to the characteristics of regional political regimes and their methods of diversity management. Next, it will contextualize the model, tracing the transformation of the relations between the federal centre and the regions in post-Soviet Russia and its impact on regional governance in its republics. The empirical framework will be further developed with a brief introduction to some key parameters of the ethnopolitical situation in the Republic of Mari El.

In its second and third parts, the paper will test the model in a case study of the dynamics of political developments in the Republic of Mari El, in the 1990s and since the 2000s, respectively. Taking the ethnic composition of the republic's population conditionally as a constant structural parameter, the paper will focus on exploration of the method of diversity management revealed in the ethnic structure of the ruling elite as a dependent variable. The first independent variable to check is the impact of minority nationalism, manifestations and roots of which some scholars see in the rise of popular ethnic mobilization and some others in elite activities. In addition, certain general aspects of political transformations are taken as independent variables.

The Republic of Mari El was selected as the subject of this case study because its population consists of two nearly equally sized ethnic groups. The dual balance of power in an ethnically divided society could have resulted in proportional representation and a power-sharing arrangement, but, nevertheless, ended in the establishment of a system of ethnic domination. This situation provides multifaceted material for the analysis of the correlation between ethnic participation, the type of political regime and its methods of diversity management. The level of ethnic political representation was taken as an indicator of the regime's method of diversity management.

In the final, fourth part, the paper will discuss the results of the application of the model, outlining how ethnic representation was achieved under the conditions of regional power sharing and domination. The continued practice of considering ethnicity as a factor when appointing officials demonstrates deliberate efforts to ensure participation of ethnic elites in decision-making, at least in issues regarding ethnicity. It is argued that, based on the given ethnic composition of the population, the patterns of representation depend on the conflictual or consensual political culture prevalent in the republican establishment.

2. Methods of diversity management and patterns of representation

2.1. Methods of studying ethnic political participation

How can one measure the level of ethnic participation and its change over time? Both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed in assessing ethnic political representation. Based on an institutionalist perspective, the study examines the place of ethnicity in the political structures. Instrumentalists emphasize the role of social institutions in the formation of a group identity (see, for example, Gorenburg 2003). The institutionalization of ethnicity in the form of the republics and other institutions and practices intended to keep an inter-ethnic balance in making key appointments makes the phenomena connected to ethnicity attainable to quantitative studies. This study focuses on ethnic political representation in regional legislatures and the participation of ethnic elites in decision-making in the regional executive structures.

Ethnic representation is assessed broadly as a descriptive representation, that is, the ethnic background of parliamentarians and government officials substitutes their standing for the group interests. The assessment of substantial representation, when the representatives also act in relation to particular interests of an ethnic group (see Pitkin 1967: 11–12), is not taken in the scope of this study, *inter alia*, because the analysis does not focus on the outcomes of the political process, such as passing legislation on ethnic issues. Nor does the study address specifically the question of whether the representatives act, first of all, on behalf of the group or in their own interests, as portrayed in instrumentalist accounts (see, for example, Giuliano 2011). At the same time, in order to assess representation under the conditions of both the pluralist politics of the democratization period and of the elitist politics of authoritarianism and to reveal the complicated relation between structure and agency in the time of change, the study further explores the problem also from an instrumentalist perspective within the elite theory.

The elite theory holds that a small group of people has most of the power in the political decision-making and retains it largely independently of democratic procedures such as elections. The political elite are those persons “able, by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations and movements, to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially” (Higley & Burton 2006: 7). In the early 1990s, the formal positions of members of the elite in Russia often changed, which complicates their study from a purely positional approach. Further, political elites might have pursued primarily their own interests, especially under authoritarian tendencies starting in the late 1990s, but always claimed to represent popular demands. Public figures, those who keep the top positions in the establishment and make up the ruling elite, were especially keen on political rhetoric.

Most regional political elites typically originated from among the members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the *nomenklatura*, that is, bureaucracy recruited under the Party’s supervision. In the early 1990s, the confrontation between old *nomenklatura* and newly emerged and innumerable regional ‘democrats’ as their main rivals determined the dynamics of the political situation in the regions.

Sometimes, (titular) ‘nationalists’ were counted as a third political force, although this segment also originated mostly from among the ethnic segment of *nomenklatura*. In republican state-building, both ‘apparatchiks’ and ‘democrats’ opposed a rather narrow program of ‘nationalists’, which had particularist ethnic group interests at its core.

In the continuously dominant discourse of ‘the friendship of peoples’ and ‘the multinational character of the republics’, the term ‘nationalism’ by default had a negative connotation and was typically used to label opponents. The core of the debate on ethnic and linguistic issues was between the visions representing particularist demands for special rights, presented by titular bilingual or Russian monolingual ‘nationalists’, and universalist claims of monolingual ‘internationalists’. Thus, this contraposition represents an ideological divide and not so much an ethnic divide, for example, because many ethnic Mari functionaries continued to share ‘internationalist’ views, while some Russians viewed titular nationalist claims as justified.

In this study, the different segments of regional political elites that acted ‘in the name of the people’, proposing their solutions to ethnic and linguistic issues, are referred to, respectively, as ‘titular/ethnic political elites’ vs ‘Russian (regional) elites’. Titular political elites of the late Soviet period are also referred to as ‘national cadres’ or ‘ethnic *nomenklatura*’. Political elites should be distinguished from cultural, economic and other types of elites. Not only ethnic political elites but also ethnic cultural elites or ‘national intelligentsia’ were the driving forces of the national movement. The titular political elite was not unified, and its more radical wing sought to present political demands. Further, some among the titular political elite endeavoured to posit the national movement as part of the democratic movement. Among the Russian elites, there were also different groupings, from right-wing nationalists to ‘internationalists’. One difficulty for the analysis is that in practice, particularist claims of Russian nationalists could be often masked as universalist claims under the conditions of the general dominance of the Russian majority in the country (see Zamyatin 2014a: 60–64).

Thus, to avoid a methodological danger of uncritically reproducing the representation of the titular elites as self-evident social agents acting in the name of ethnic groups as natural structural units of society (see Brubaker 2004), this study accepts a relational and situational understanding of elites. Further, in order not to obtain a false impression that ethnic issues were central to the political agenda and that the divide between ‘titular’ and ‘Russian’ elites was the most important one, one should remember that, in focusing on study of ethnic political participation in Mari El, this paper only schematically overviews the trajectory of the republic’s general political developments. In reality, ethnicity was politically salient only at certain historical moments and around certain events, mostly in the early 1990s (see Červonnaja 1996: 15).

Based on an instrumentalist perspective within the elite theory, the study utilizes functional, positional and biographical approaches in exploring the regional political elites. The focus of the analysis will be on the ethnic structure of the ruling elites and its correlation with the ethnic composition of the population. The ethnic structure can, with some qualifications, be produced based on the data on an ethnic background

of the deputies and officials, which is not always available in a systematized way. The problem here is that the data on ethnicity in the case of the Christianized minorities cannot be deduced from personal names, as in case of the Muslim minorities, and must be sought out separately.

Since the Soviet times, information on ethnicity was considered essential and was provided in biographies of public officials. The accessibility of the data increases with the ranks of officials and their publicity. It is not easy to provide evidence on the ethnic background of civil servants, because these data are considered private and usually remain undisclosed, or are available only in an aggregated mode. Often accessible is the data about the ethnic background of parliament or government members. Given frequent turnover in the top government positions during the last decades, these data are not systematically presented here. Data on the ethnic background of the chief executives, presidents of the republics (since 2010, heads of the republics) or governors of the regions, who nowadays are the only first-order political actors in the regional political landscapes (see Zamyatin 2014b: 203), is typically accessible in open sources.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The exclusion of minorities from public decision-making might provoke conflicts. Democratic states typically use certain mechanisms and guarantees in order to ensure inclusion of minorities and to manage diversity in such a way that enables their political participation. Non-democratic states endeavor to prevent conflicts by using such methods of diversity management as hegemonic control or forced assimilation, which reinforce the system of domination over minorities. At the same time, the distinction between democratic and non-democratic regimes does not always correlate with inclusive and exclusive methods. For example, domination is also sustained under the regime of ‘ethnic democracy’. In contrast, elements of power sharing can be used in both democratic and non-democratic states (see McGarry 2010: 36–37).

Minority participation in decision-making can take such forms as self-government arrangements, co-decision-making and other forms of minority inclusion or minority consultations. Representation is a form of political participation that is not only most visible for the public but also is usually taken as the key indicator of participation and inclusion by the majority and sometimes by the minority leaders. At the same time, if parliamentary representation often remains rather symbolic, multiple available forms provide for a more effective participation in public life. Participation in political institutions takes the form not only of minority representation in elected bodies but also of the inclusion of members of a minority ethnic background in executive structures and the judiciary (see Palermo 2010: 437–439).

A hypothetical complete ethnic representation in a divided society would reflect the ethnic composition of the population (Horowitz 1990: 116). In reality, of course, ethnic preferences typically give way in the agenda setting to political, economic, social and other interests. The less politically salient the issue of ethnicity and less probable ethnic conflict are, the more divergent from the ethnic composition the

representation is. The larger group would usually be overrepresented for a number of reasons, ranging from a rational incentive to vote for one's co-ethnics to effects of the majoritarian electoral system. Without special arrangements to ensure minority participation, overrepresentation would result in 'the dictatorship of the majority' and ethnic domination.

John McGarry defines domination as 'a hierarchy of privilege in a political system, where one group can exert power over another, stamping its culture and authority on the collective life of the state'. McGarry lists the methods of ethnic domination that can be used in a formally democratic state and include demographic, electoral, institutional, territorial, coercive and legal domination (McGarry 2010: 41). Systemically, this can be done either by establishing hegemonic control or by promoting assimilation, which are respectively inclusive or exclusive strategies of domination but can be pursued simultaneously. Ian Lustick defines control as 'the emergence and maintenance of a relationship in which the superior power of one segment is mobilized to enforce stability by constraining the political actions and opportunities of another segment or segments' (Lustick 1979: 328). The three main mechanisms of control at the societal level in his model are segmentation, dependence and co-optation. The exercise of ethnic dominance in the form of hegemonic control is implicit and can be easily detected only as exclusion, when it erupts into an open political confrontation.

In order to battle discrimination and compensate for their underrepresentation, ethnic elites might choose the strategy of popular mobilization and provoke a conflict. The state can choose in its response between assimilationist, integrationist or accommodationist strategies for the prevention or resolution of ethnic conflicts. McGarry, O'Leary and Simeon note that the integrationist strategy aims at the diminution of ethnic differences in favor of an overarching identity. The use of the integrationist strategy differs from the assimilationist in that it imposes unification only in the public sphere and does not demand abandonment of one's ethnic identity in private. Both strategies can use combinations of various methods of ethnic domination (see McGarry, O'Leary & Simeon 2008).

Among different approaches proposed within an accommodationist strategy, the consensual approach developed by Arend Lijphart deserves attention in this paper (for the applicability of other approaches, see Zamyatin 2015b). According to Lijphart, power sharing is possible in a plural society when all major segments of society enjoy proportional representation or at least a share of power. Lijphart lists some conditions for stability of the political regime based on power sharing. In order for power sharing to last, communities should enjoy segmental autonomy and their elites should realize the necessity of cooperation. He notes that power sharing will be stable in the situation of the multiple balance of power, when there are more than two segments in a plural society, which facilitates cooperation of elites and their participation in a grand coalition (Lijphart 2008: 33).

Territorial self-government is an accommodationist alternative to power sharing. Federalism is a territorial solution that can also be used as a device directed at integration or accommodation of minorities, by implementing power sharing and by establishing their territorial self-government (see McGarry & O'Leary 2015). Power

sharing in a federal system functions at the federal and regional level by means of minority inclusion. At the same time, the effectiveness of territorial self-government with a lack of special regional arrangements depends on the ethnic composition of regions. Under the majoritarian system, the largest group will be overrepresented in regional assemblies and government offices and will establish the regime of ethnic domination (see Zamyatin 2015b). Therefore, according to this conceptual model, the ethnic composition of the population of a territorial unit will determine the patterns of ethnic representation, unless there are some other factors that influence the patterns of representation.

2.3. The Russian Federation

The major device that ensured the accommodation of ethnic diversity in the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was the establishment in the 1920s of the multinational federation composed of the nationally defined territorial units newly created based on the Wilsonian principle of self-determination of their autochthonous peoples. The system was designed to function through a multi-level government, where the 'titular nations' should have enjoyed self-rule in their respective Soviet republics based on the nation-state model and autonomies. While Supreme Councils, quasi-parliaments elected on a non-alternative basis, performed a rather decorative role, the real decision-making was concentrated in hands of the CPSU and *nomenklatura*. 'National-state building' was conjoined with the policy of 'indigenization' of the state apparatus that ensured participation of 'national cadres' in the *nomenklatura*. An unwritten practice emerged of appointing individuals of titular ethnic origin to the positions of chief executives in these territorial units (see Zamyatin 2014b: 199).

While formally maintained throughout the Soviet period, the federal system was eroded in the following decades, and the USSR functioned *de facto* as a unitary state. Non-Russians were proportionally represented and often even overrepresented in Supreme Councils. However, it was representativeness in the CPSU and *nomenklatura* that provided substantial access to power structures. In order to maintain control over the union and autonomous republics, an ethnic Russian was typically appointed the first secretary in the CPSU regional committees. Decades-long mixing of the population due to effects of economic policies and deliberate efforts to promote voluntary assimilation of smaller groups resulted in a decrease in the demographic share of many titular groups, who were now in a numerical minority in most of the autonomous republics and regions in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) (see, for example, Lallukka 1990: 38–43).

During the processes of the disintegration of the USSR, the autonomous republics of the RSFSR followed the way of the union republics and passed declarations of state sovereignty, which unilaterally upgraded their political status to that of national republics. Despite some demands for a revision of the borders to address the issue of ethnicity (see, for example, Červonnaja 1996: 24), the upgrade took place within the existing borders, which, however, did not prevent some violent conflicts. The creation of certain new republics by splitting previously existing ones or upgrading them from

autonomous districts to republics changed only the status of the borders, not the borders themselves. Political elites in most former autonomous republics sought primarily an increase in self-governance and not outright independence. In the situation of uncertainty, regional elites endeavored to maximize their power and bargained with the new democratic elites in the RSFSR, *inter alia*, for a treaty-based federation and regional legal supremacy (Gel'man 1999).

After the collapse of the USSR, an attempt to transition to democracy directed political developments of the early 1990s in Russia. Reconstruction of the state structure in line with democratic principles included the division of powers both horizontally between branches of authorities as well as vertically through the federative structure with two tiers of government: the central and regional authorities. However, the 1992 federation treaty had not been attached to the new Russian constitution (12 December 1993). The constitution established a federal system, wherein the republics were made formally equal with the other constituent entities of the federation. In practice, the system provided a varying degree of self-governance for regions. Some republics continued bargaining for a special status in negotiating power-sharing treaties with the federal centre. The ethnic character of a region was among the resources for political bargaining that allowed for better conditions of power sharing (see Zamyatin 2015b).

The strategy of dealing with diversity combined some assimilationist, integrationist and accommodationist policies (see Concept of the State Nationalities Policy, 15 June 1996). First, a strong federal centre emerged, where the decision-making was based on the majoritarian principle, that imposed supremacy of the federal legislation, centralized fiscal policy and security. At the same time, the multinational character of the federation was initially not challenged, and for a while, the republics continued to position themselves as national republics. The state endeavored neither to demographically outnumber the titular groups nor to ensure their majority with help of the methods of right-sizing and right-peopling its federation units. Thus, some titular groups remained in the numerical majority and some in the minority in their republics. Secondly, national-cultural autonomy became a novelty intended to provide non-territorial self-governance to minority groups without titular regions or residing beyond their borders. Some in the republics feared that this was meant as a substitution to ethnic federalism. Yet, national-cultural autonomy had not become an effective form of participation and could not stop the assimilation trends among many dispersed minority groups (see, e.g., Prina 2012).

One of the main channels of ethnic political participation is representation in political institutions. In Russia, no special arrangements were introduced that would guarantee ethnic representation in elected bodies. At the federal level, the upper chamber of parliament, the Federation Council, represented regions, but ethnic representation was not institutionalized (see, for example, Safin 2011). This had to be achieved both at the federal and regional level in mainstream party politics through attracting ethnic voting. Ethnic voting is the tendency of ethnic groups to vote for co-ethnic candidates. Studies on federal elections in Russia have demonstrated the existence of ethnic voting, especially in ethnic regions, throughout the post-Soviet

period. Geographical concentration of the titular groups in the republics made ethnicity salient, leading the people to vote along ethnic lines in the elections of the lower chamber, the State Duma (Moser 2013).

In the early 2000s, the transformation of the regime towards its more authoritarian variety and the recentralization through building the ‘vertical of power’ resulted in a decline of federalism in Russia. The vertical division of powers was undermined especially after the removal of the elections of regional chief executives starting in 2005. Legal prohibition of ethnic and regional parties since the 2001 became a mark of the turn toward a republicanist variety of integrationism (McGarry, O’Leary & Simeon 2008: 48). In 2012, nation building was officially announced as the new strategic goal (Strategy of the State Nationalities Policy, 19 December 2012). It is notable that the term ‘integration’ was used exclusively in the context of migrants and never mentioned in the context of traditional groups, which could mean that assimilation is envisaged for the latter. The project faces many difficulties, not least that so far policymakers have not been able to agree upon what nation should be built (see Zamyatin 2015a: 300–304). Given this agenda, one bold conjecture would be that the transformation of the regime into a variety of autocratic rule could have also triggered the fall in ethnic political participation.

2.4. Republics

Political elites in republics had a common interest in increasing self-governance of the republic and saw its benefits in building the republic as a form of national statehood of the titular people, which provided a better bargaining position vis-à-vis the federal centre. The common roots of the regional political elite, who originated from among the regional Russian industrial and titular agrarian segments of *nomenklatura*, made it an ‘ideologically unified elite’ and facilitated the compromise. In order to improve its bargaining position, the ethnic *nomenklatura* sought an alliance with ethnic cultural activists who expressed their concerns about the community’s shift from the titular language to Russian and toward ethnic assimilation. The ideology of ‘national revival’ turned ethnicity into a significant source of solidarity and led to the creation of national movements. The bargaining power of ethnic elites among other segments of regional elites depended on their ability to mobilize popular support. Popular ethnic mobilization provided legitimacy to their claims for power and ensured their initial strong position irrespective of the ethnic composition of a republic’s population (see Zamyatin 2013a: 147–148).

A gradual decline in ethnic mobilization and the return from mass politics to conventional politics of political bargaining diminished the political salience of ethnicity. Now, members of the elite made strategic choices based on the ethnic structure of regional elites and ethnic composition mattered more, because ethnic representation had to be achieved through electoral mobilization. Under the majoritarian rule, it paid to support ethnic allegiances in the situation of the numerical majority of the titular group. Ethnic elites in the republics with a titular minority were typically losing their positions, especially in the regional legislatures. In order to gain legitimacy,

national movements were institutionalized in form of ‘people’s congresses’, which were meant to become the body of ethnic representation. However, the congresses were recognized in the Russian law only as public associations (see Osipov 2011: 8–9).

Among the federation units, the republics and autonomous districts were created in order to provide regional self-governance of their titular ethnic groups. Claiming that titular groups could not exercise self-governance, being in the regional minority under the conditions of majority rule, ethnic elites demanded a special status for the ‘titular nation’ in the emerging political systems. As a solution to the problem of low participation, they proposed establishing a two-chamber legislature, where the second chamber would be formed based on ethnic representation or, at least, territorial representation. Alternatively, a mixed electoral principle was proposed through both proportional and territorial electoral districts. However, now the interests of regional Russian elites and ethnic elites diverged. As a result of the compromise and in line with the according formula of the Russian constitution, the constitutions of all republics recognized the republic’s ‘multinational people’ and not the ‘titular people’ as the source of sovereignty. The claim for an ethnically based chamber was universally rejected (see Zamyatin 2013b: 341–345).

At the same time, a territorially based upper chamber was created in some republics, for example, in Bashkortostan. This chamber of legislature was composed of territorially elected heads of local administrations, who were appointed by the president of the republic and were predominantly of titular ethnic origin. This was ground for some scholars to write about the ‘etatization of the titular ethnicity’ (see Galljamov 1998). Administrative-territorial electoral districts without a separate chamber were endorsed, for example, in Mari El, and could also back some ethnic representation. In single districts formed in the administrative-territorial units, more voters typically reside in urban districts than in rural ones. Titular groups are often mostly rural people and form the majority in rural areas, which increased the chances of there being candidates belonging to the titular group (see Zamyatin 2013b: 353–355).

Similarly to the arrangements at the federal level, strong presidencies were established in many republics. According to law, the same person could not be elected president for more than two consecutive four-year terms. However, the system was predisposed to the establishment of a monocentrist regime with an authoritarian rule, and this two-term restriction was later often undermined. Power networks around the presidents were often formed based on allegiance to the leaders of titular or Russian origin and might have contributed to ethnic political participation. Some constitutions included the requirement of the knowledge of the state languages from the heads of republics. As was the case in some former union republics, the language requirements were intended to be instrumental in keeping the power in the hands of titular elites because practically with no exception only their members were bilingual. The implementation of these provisions was, however, prevented by antidiscrimination clauses and has been on hold since the late 1990s (Zamyatin 2013b: 370–371).

Overrepresentation of titular elites in regional legislature and government led to their domination, or the ‘ethnization of regional elites’ (see Galljamov 1998). Titular

elites relied on patronage networks, which could limit the number of ethnic Russians and representatives of other non-titular groups among the ruling elites (see Rybalko 2013). The same process led to the domination of regional Russian elites in many republics with a titular minority. Hegemonic control was first introduced as the means of imposing stability in Chechnya and was expanded to some other republics in the 2000s. In both cases, regional authorities tried to prevent the appearance of ethnic issues in public discourse in order not to attract attention to this imbalance. The conflicts still emerged, however, particularly in the republics with a small share of the titular groups in the population (see Turovskij 2006: 692–694).

In the republics with a comparable share of ethnic groups in their ethnic composition, popularly elected heads of republics irrespective of their ethnic background had incentives to consult with ‘interests of the autochthonous people’ in the light of forthcoming elections. Under these conditions, the participation of ethnic elites depended on their ability to negotiate power-sharing agreements with other segments of the regional elites. Agreements typically foresaw that ethnic elites were given their share in power through access to government offices. As a result, a balanced participation was ensured in the executive structures. This arrangement depended, however, on the support of the president, because tacit agreements were not institutionalized and were followed only through practices (see Zamyatin 2014b: 202–204).

There was a practice of taking into account the ethnicity of candidates and establishing an ethnic balance when making appointments to the top offices, such as republican ministers. As the core of the ‘national revival’ agenda lay with the social, cultural and educational spheres, officials of titular ethnic origin usually were appointed to head executive authorities in the spheres of inter-ethnic relations, mass media, education and culture, which in effect amounted to executive power sharing. Some other spheres, too, such as agriculture, were often given to individuals of titular ethnic origin, because titular groups typically resided in rural areas. It is notable that in republics with a titular majority, an executive authority in the sphere of nationalities policy was typically not created, because it was assumed that the republic as a whole performed this function, but also in order not to raise ethnic issues in public discourse (see Zamyatin 2014b: 201–207). At the same time, practically all republics and many regions established consultative bodies to deal with ethnic issues.

Despite democratization that opened public offices for contestation, continuity of the regional political elites was high. Nevertheless, elections remain to this day an important source of political legitimation under the regime of electoral authoritarianism (see Gel'man 2014). The turn to authoritarianism in the Kremlin did not automatically trigger change in the regional equilibrium that had been achieved. Titular groups in a minority situation in some regions had not enjoyed self-governance in the first place. The power-sharing arrangements in other regions largely continued to work. Yet in other regions, which is of interest for this study, regional power sharing was replaced by ethnic domination. An indicator of the latter change is the fall in proportional participation (see Zamyatin 2015b).

2.5. The Mari Republic

The Mari are an ethnic group who speak a Finno-Ugric language. If measured by their geographical distribution and language retention rates, ethnic Mari are a relatively unassimilated and moderately concentrated ethnic group with their 'ethnic homeland' having the status of a titular republic. According to data from the 1989 population census, about half of the almost 650 thousand Mari in Russia resided outside the republic, with noticeable Mari diasporas living in the regions to the North and East, including a hundred-thousand strong Mari diaspora geographically concentrated in the Republic of Bashkortostan. Twenty years later, the overall number of Mari in Russia had decreased by a hundred thousand, mostly due to depopulation and ethnic assimilation, to a larger extent outside the titular republic.

The Republic of Mari El is one of the six ethnic republics situated in the Volga-Urals, neighbouring the Republics of Chuvashia and Tatarstan to the South and South-East as well as the Nizhegorod and Kirov Regions to the West and North. In 1989, out of almost 750 thousand residents of the Mari Republic, about 324 thousand reported themselves to be ethnic Mari, making up about half of all Mari in Russia. This includes a subgroup of Hill Mari who make up about one tenth of the Mari and compactly reside in the Gornomariiskii rural district. In the population of the Mari Republic, the share of titular and Russian groups is comparable. In 1989, ethnic Mari constituted 43.3%, ethnic Russians 47.5%, ethnic Tatars 5.9% and ethnic Chuvash 1.2%. Two decades later, the overall number of residents had dropped by about fifty thousand, but the share of the groups has not significantly changed. In 2010, ethnic Mari constituted 43.9%, ethnic Russians 47.4%, ethnic Tatars less than 6% and ethnic Chuvash less than 1% (among the 95% of the population who reported their ethnic identity).

How ethnically divided or integrated is a society? The answer to this question should be sought in the type of ethnic and social stratification on the scale between segmentation and social cohesion, which can be measured along such parameters as correlation between social status, ethnicity, faith, language and inter-ethnic marriage. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the ethnic composition of the republic has changed only insignificantly due to the interplay of two opposing trends. On the one hand, urbanization of the Mari was accompanied by a shift from the titular language to Russian and some ethnic assimilation into an urban 'high culture' among the second-generation young cohorts. On the other hand, the outmigration from the republic in the post-Soviet period, which depopulated the region by almost a tenth by now, is to be attributed, first of all, to outflow of the Russian urban dwellers, who, as mostly urban dwellers, also had a lower birth rate (see Concept of the State Nationality Policy, 13 December 1997).

The ethnic Russians are numerically predominant in the republican towns of Yoshkar-Ola, Volzhsk and Kozmodemyansk, as well as in the Yurinskii rural district. Ethnic Mari make up the majority in most other rural districts, while the rural districts close to Yoshkar-Ola have comparable shares of the main groups (see Lallukka 1990: 114–120). The share of urban dwellers in the republic's total population is growing

slowly, and increased from 61.6% in 1989 to 63% in 2010. This share has continued increased also among ethnic Mari, of whom only 36.8% lived in urban areas in 1989. In 1989, Maris made up 29.2% of all urban dwellers and 23.4% of the residents of the capital town of Yoshkar-Ola (see *Probuždenie* 1996b: 250–252). The continuing trend of urbanization shows development towards a slowly progressing convergence of ethnic groups, including in the share of inter-ethnic marriages, although it has still remained relatively low (below 20% in 2002 and even lower for the ethnic Tatars, see Fauzer 2011). Thus, the issue of faith has some relevance. Christian Orthodoxy is shared by many Russians and Mari, but among the latter, there are also adherents to the Mari traditional religion. Yet, the deepest religious divide is between the Orthodox groups and the Muslim Tatars, who reside compactly in the Paranginskii rural district.

However, the numbers alone do not fully characterize the ethnosocial situation, because in certain ways, they misrepresent and undermine the complexity of people's identities. Due to the Soviet practice of written fixation of one's ethnic identity in personal documents, people routinely tended to report the fixed data in population censuses. At the same time, most individuals with a minority background were bilingual by the end of the Soviet era. The language retention rate of 88.4% among the Mari in the republic was relatively high, but many among the urbanized young population already had incomplete knowledge of language of the group they identified with or lacked it altogether (see Lallukka 1990: 71–82). As a result, the common people often had multiple and fluid identities, while most were indifferent to the issue of ethnicity, a phenomenon that has been termed 'national nihilism'. With these adjustments, it would be more correct to speak only about a relatively proportional demographic distribution of the groups.

Furthermore, complementary social and ethnic cleavages characterize the interaction between the groups. The pattern of urban-rural divide reveals the main line of social segmentation between the communities. Dependence of the Mari on the urban Russians manifests itself, above all, in the labor market, because many Mari are still employed in such sectors as agriculture and forestry. This pattern has also been reproduced at the level of elites, among whom 'national cadres' were traditionally overrepresented in leadership of the agrarian sector, while the Russian urban elites were predominant in industry. Based on unpublished data from the 1989 census, Elise Giuliano evaluated that Mari El was second from the bottom among the republics (next to Chechnya) in terms of its ratio of ethnic division of labour, with two Russians in white-collar jobs for every Mari (see Giuliano 2011: 77–78).

An economic particularity of Mari El is that it has only poor natural resources and low economic potential, with a prevailing agrarian sector and some military industry. It was one of the poorest regions and its budget was subsidized by more than half from the federal budget (see Šarov 1994). The economic crisis made the social issues much more acute for political life than ethnic issues. Due to the republic's economic dependence on the federal centre, the regional political elite had no economic incentive to engage in regional separatism. The republic followed the steps of the other republics on the way to sovereignization once these steps had already been

endorsed by Moscow. In these circumstances, the intention of nationalists to 'wake up dormant primordial identities' by raising the issue of national revival on the political agenda not only faced harsh resistance on the side of the establishment, but it did not resonate with popular attitudes either.

Giuliano argued that social inequality is not translated automatically into higher support for nationalism, and that it is nationalists who can use this potential political resource by constructing ethnic economic grievances. In fact, she found that, despite the high correlation of social inequality and ethnicity, Mari El was among the republics with a low public support for nationalism (see Giuliano 2011: 34–36). Based on media analysis (of fifteen newspaper issues, which seem to have included only the official newspaper *Mariiskaia Pravda*), she built up evidence for this evaluation on a lack of demonstrations or occurrences of mass ethnic violence, and attributed the meager electoral results of national organizations to their failure to connect the problem of the Mari underrepresentation in high-status jobs to the goal of republican sovereignty (see Giuliano 2011: 149–150, 170).

She explains low popular support for nationalist leaders as being a result of their narrow focus on national revival issues but not on rhetoric about the disadvantaged social position of the Mari, which, according to her, could have found resonance with the masses, as happened in some other republics. Dmitri Gorenburg did not draw such a drastic line between cultural nationalism and regional separatism, but also found a low support for nationalism in Mari El (see Gorenburg 2003: 13, 253). In Miroslav Hroch's comparative analysis, the two are supplementary: national movements typically present cultural demands under the conditions of suppression and shift to political demands under liberalization (see Hroch 1985: 22–24). It might be that a delay in presenting political demands was conditioned by a stronger standoff of the establishment. Furthermore, it seems that the significance of popular support in economically backward regions such as the Mari republic should not be overestimated, because it was the regional elites who mostly predetermined the political agenda.

This study will argue that the Mari nationalists, despite failure to achieve their political goals, were relatively successful in spreading the nationalist message at least at the level of the elites, and in adding the issue of ethnic political representation to the republic's political agenda, although it was the ethnic *nomenklatura* members who got the most out of it. This success might have been overshadowed and underestimated retroactively in the light of further failure of the national revival program and the expulsion of many ethnic Mari politicians starting in 2000. In its following sections, in order to test this hypothesis, the study will diachronically explore the links between the main stages in the political development in Mari El and the level of ethnic political representation. The study follows the suggestion to assess the transformation of regional political regimes through the dichotomies of 'autonomy-dependence', 'democracy-authoritarianism', 'monocentrism-polycentrism' and 'consolidation-competition' (see Turovsky 2010: 20).

3. Dynamics of the ethno-political processes in Mari El in the 1990s

3.1. 1989–1990: “We are not nationalists!” The national movement and its cultural and political demands

Inspired by the creation of the national fronts in the Soviet Baltic republics and the events elsewhere in the country, Mari cultural activists and intellectuals started to express concerns about ethnic assimilation and organize themselves, founding a youth organization called *U Vij* (*New Force*) (Sanukov 1996: 49). Among the significant events that led to the emergence of the Mari national movement was the first congress of Finno-Ugric writers of Russia, held in Yoshkar-Ola in spring 1989. Its arrangement was initiated by Nikolai Rybakov, the chair of the Supreme Council of the republic and the head of its writers’ union. The congress was followed by numerous Finno-Ugric conferences, festivals and other joint activities that served the channel of spreading nationalist ideas in regions based on a perception of Finno-Ugric solidarity. In addition, the experience of the national movement in Tatarstan and its institutionalization provided organizational models to emulate (Červonnaja 1996: 21–22).

The next step in the organizational process was taken in autumn 1989, when *U Vij* initiated the (re-)establishment of a democratic movement known as *Mari Ušem* (*Mari Union*, titled after the organization with this name created in 1917; see *Sjezdy* 2008), which became the institutionalized core of the national movement. In April 1990, a constituent congress instituted *Mari Ušem* in its charter as a ‘democratic public association’. The majority of the delegates, some of whom came to the congress also from other regions, decided that the association was to pursue only cultural goals, although some younger delegates wanted to include political goals and even turn the association into a political party (Sanukov 1996: 50–51, Martjanov 2006). For example, in one of the earlier charter drafts prepared by younger delegates, the compulsory bilingualism of public officials was mentioned, but the clause did not make it into the final charter text. Nevertheless, one of the congress’ resolutions addressed the problem of the disproportional ethnic representation among officials (*Probuždenie* 1996a: 198–199).

In autumn 1990, some of the more radical activists left *Mari Ušem* and, in January 1991, registered a social-political movement called *Kugeze Mlande* (*‘Ancestral Land’*) that presented political demands, including the demand for an ethnic Mari chamber in a two-chamber parliament (Červonnaja 1996: 17–18). The second *Mari Ušem* congress held in April 1992 still tried to avoid ‘politicization’ but took the decision to organize a Mari People’s Congress later in the same year analogously to the same type of congresses held by other titular groups. The purpose of this congress was to demonstrate that there was wide popular support behind the national organizations and, thus, to add legitimacy to their demands (on congresses, see Osipov 2011). However, the population remained largely passive and ignorant of their ethnicity and did not join the national movement en masse (Lallukka 2003: 266–267).

From a comparative perspective, *Mari Ušem* was unique in its decision to cooperate with the republican leadership and not to become an oppositional force (see Giuliano 2011: 171–172). This initial willingness of *Mari Ušem* to cooperate is not surprising, if one notes that the organization was created in consultations with the CPSU regional committee or, according to some sources, even under its supervision (see K[asimov] 1992). At the end of the Soviet epoch, the titular nationality was quite well represented among top officials in the Mari ASSR. Notably, the first secretary of the regional committee of the CPSU, Grigorii Posibeev, and the chair of the Supreme Council, Nikolai Rybakov, were both ethnic Mari. By mobilizing ethnic support, a ‘national cadres’ segment of the regional *nomenklatura* saw its chance to retain power.

The access to leadership and continuing party control over *Mari Ušem* made presenting particularist political demands at the initial stage unnecessary and undesirable. Constructing ethnic grievances by emphasizing social inequality might have brought the national movement benefits in the long run, but it would have instantly provoked conflict with the authorities. The mainstream *nomenklatura* perceived *Mari Ušem* cautiously and with suspicion, inter alia, because of its early attempt to enter into a coalition with the democratic movement (Červonnaja 1996: 30–31). As the democrats had never actually gained access to power in the republic, this attempt might have been another source of weakness of *Mari Ušem*. It was the membership of the *nomenklatura* across the ethnic lines that potentially provided grounds for cooperation.

Neither the national movement nor the slowly emerging democratic movement in the republic was strong enough to initiate the transition to the new regime. For a while, the party managed to maintain control in the republic despite the overall changes in the country. Only a small minority among the people’s deputies of the Supreme Council elected in March 1990 held democratic views. Predictably, Posibeev became the chairman of the Supreme Council. Despite some delay, immediate witnesses reported emerging support among activists for political sovereignty (see Senatova & K[asimov] 1992). With further liberalization of the atmosphere in the country, the leadership of the national movement also dared to express political aspirations and concern about under-representation of the Mari in power echelons. One matter of concern was that, without balancing the ethnic composition, the share of the deputies of titular nationality among the 150 people’s deputies to the Supreme Council dropped from about 42% in 1985 to only about 25% elected in the first semi-competitive elections in spring 1990 (Sanukov 1996: 52).

3.2. 1990–1993: “I am with my people.” Sovereignization, *nomenklatura* and proportional representation

A change came in August 1990, when the Russian People’s Deputies Congress prohibited the regional party bosses from simultaneously acting as the chairs of the Supreme Councils. Vladislav Zotin, an ethnic Mari and the secretary of the Volzhskii rural district CPSU committee, replaced Posibeev as chairman. Zotin managed successfully to push some changes through the conservative Supreme Council (Belokurova

& Denisova 2003: 39–44). Notably, he advocated for overcoming the crisis through sovereignization.

In the sovereignty declaration of October 1990, the Supreme Council declared state sovereignty of the republic, ‘implementing the right of the Mari people and the whole people of the republic to self-determination’ (see Preamble, Declaration of State Sovereignty, 22 October 1990). Later, a corresponding amendment was made to the Soviet-era republican constitution. In this context, state sovereignty did not represent national sovereignty of the Mari people but the territorial sovereignty of the republic. Furthermore, the declaration to a large extent remained an act of rhetoric, with almost no other political goal than to improve the bargaining position of the republican authorities vis-à-vis the federal centre. This specific form of sovereignization served the joint interests of the *nomenklatura* but did not guarantee a better standing for the national movement (see Sanukov 1996: 51–53).

The prohibition of the CPSU following the attempted August 1991 coup ended the period of power dualism between the CPSU regional committee and the Supreme Council. The latter became the centre of power and acted quite independently. Wishing to affirm his dominance and following the example of the neighboring republics, Zotin initiated the establishment of a presidency in the Mari Republic, too. In October 1991, on the day of the Supreme Council’s vote on the issue of presidency, activists from *Mari Ušem* gathered in front of the parliament building demanding that the president know both state languages. All three candidates for the presidency were of ethnic Mari origin, whereas all the vice-presidential candidates were ethnic Russians (see Zamyatin 2013b: 360–362). As its candidate, *Mari Ušem* nominated its member Anatolii Popov, who passed to the second round and collected 15% of the votes. In December 1991, Zotin, with 59% of the votes, was elected the first republican president (see Zamyatin 2013a: 142–143).

The president combined the offices of the highest republican official and the head of government. Upon taking the presidency, Zotin strived to keep control over the Supreme Council by promoting the endorsement of Iurii Minakov, an ethnic Russian and a loyal functionary, as its chair. Minakov won against Posibehev. However, constant conflict between the president and the legislature became a routine feature of political life. In particular, the Russian-dominated legislature resisted to the compulsory study of Mari as the state language and the requirement of its knowledge from public servants. Realizing his inability to push his variant of the constitution through the legislature, Zotin was forced to delay its adoption and failed to consolidate his power. The president still had the key role in the regional political system, inter alia, because he headed the government and appointed its members (Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 49–50).

Zotin was cautious not to emphasize ethnic rhetoric, and in his inaugural speech, for example, he avoided it altogether. However, he later expressed support for the national movement on several less public occasions. For example, when asked at an animist worship whether he is also an animist, Zotin answered, ‘I am with my people’ (Bronštejn 1996), meaning the ethnic Mari and, thus, giving yet another sign of his support for the religious segment of the national movement, formed around the

religious organization *Oš Mari-Čimari*. Zotin himself was of Hill Mari origin and often promoted his fellow countrymen to government positions even more than other Mari. The sub-regional elite group of Hill Mari and their organization *Tuan Vel* were loyal to Zotin. This unproportioned 'cadres policy' offended the Meadow Mari elite and brought an intra-ethnic division to the forefront. It was also the reason members of *Mari Ušem*, who were mainly Meadow Mari, had earlier not supported his presidential candidacy (see Senatova & K[asimov] 1992, Šarov 2002: 27, Matsuzato 2003: 21).

Apart from this, the main ethnic groups were proportionally represented among the government members. Many members of Zotin's government and almost all employees of his presidential administration were ethnic Mari, including the minister of culture, Viktor Nikolaev. Maris were numerous in ministries of the social-cultural bloc and the interior ministry, but few were appointed to other law enforcement agencies. According to the data presented at the Congress of the Mari People, ethnic Mari still comprised at the time only 10% of personnel in the ministry of justice and 24% in the regional department of security. In judiciary, Mari made up 28% of the Supreme Court members and 19% of procurators (see Pekteev 1996). This disproportion, incidentally, is an expression of the securitization of minority issues predetermined by the continued use of this coercive and legal type of ethnic domination throughout the period (Weller 2010).

Zotin sought to consolidate his base by supporting the activities of the Mari national movement (Červonnaja 1996: 33–34). In October 1992, the Congress of the Mari People was held, and was counted as the third of its kind, in order to emphasize its continuity with the two congresses that had taken place in 1917 and 1918, respectively. The authorities took its organization into their hands. Nikolai Rybakov, who in 1991 became the state secretary, headed the organizing committee, rather than the chair of *Mari Ušem* Vasilii Pekteev, artistic director of the Shketan Mari National Theater. On the concept of the constitution, the congress demanded in its resolution the creation of a two-chamber parliament, wherein the members of an upper chamber elected from the administrative units would have been required to know the state languages (*Probuždenie* 1996a: 308–310). Public officials were also required to know the state languages. Another resolution demanded proportional ethnic representation in law enforcement. It was decided that the congress would be held every four years, in line with the electoral cycle. A decision was also made to establish the All-Mari Council or *Mer Kanaš*, an executive body for work between the congresses. It was decided that its head would be Pekteev, who remained simultaneously the leader of *Mari Ušem* (Šarov 1994: 14–16, *Sjezdy* 2008: 766).

In autumn 1991, a cultural movement known as *Rus'* was created as a counterweight to the Mari movement by mobilizing local ethnic Russians, with the goal of opposing the activities of the Mari movement, as had been done in other regions as well. In November 1992, the *Rus'* movement appealed against the political ambitions of the congress and demanded the resignation of Rybakov and other government members for their participation in the congress, which they viewed as inappropriate. In a few days, a group of thirty deputies of the Supreme Council protested against the decisions of the Congress of the Mari People and interpreted its demand for a

political standing as an attempt to act instead of parliament as the sole 'legitimately elected authority'. These actions were a sign of consolidation of the joint 'Russian elite' across the 'apparatchiks' vs 'democrats' divide against the political ambitions of the national movement. Both Rybakov in the name of government and Popov in the name of the national movement were on the defensive and tried to apologize, arguing against accusations that they were nationalists (see Červonnaja 1996: 30–31, 34–36, *Probuždenie* 1996a: 99–101, 155–163, 317–320).

In the federative relations, the Mari Republic's authorities emphasized their loyalty to the federal centre. In March 1992, the republic was among the regions to sign the federation treaty. After the October 1993 events and the power shift in Moscow, Mari El was among the few republics that immediately chose to reform the structure of its authorities, complying with Yeltsin's presidential decrees that had initiated the constitutional reform, even if these had only a recommendatory character for the republics. President Zotin used this opportunity to get rid of the Supreme Council and to establish a new parliament of the republic, the State Assembly (Šarov 1994: 7–9). The State Assembly was elected simultaneously with the referendum on the Russian constitution (12 December 1993) and the Russian parliamentary elections.

Out of its thirty deputies, fourteen were elected in single-mandate districts in rural municipalities and eight in urban districts, while a further eight were elected through the party lists. In 1992, Zotin joined the pro-government party or, as it was dubbed, the 'party of power', *Our Home is Russia*. However, the party list of the Agrarian Party, the second major leftist party after communists, received plurality of votes in the all-republican district, followed by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), founded in 1993. Given the republic's economic troubles, the success of left-wing parties was not surprising. *Mari Ušem* received 7.1% of votes, which resulted in one deputy seat for Gennadii Maksimov; *Kugeze Mlande* received 3.4% of votes and could not pass the entry threshold. Thirteen deputies of the State Assembly, or 43.3%, were of ethnic Mari origin. Fourteen were Russians, two Tatars and one Ukrainian, which roughly reflected the ethnic structure of the population. The new parliament elected Aleksandr Smirnov, an ethnic Mari, as its chairman (Šarov 1994: 11–13).

On the same day, Vjačeslav Kislicyn, USSR people's deputy and an ethnic Russian, and Anatolii Zenkin, former secretary of the CPSU regional committee, first vice chairman of the republican Supreme Council and an ethnic Mari, were elected the representatives of the republic to the Federation Council with 40.8% and 24.4% of the votes, respectively. *Mari Ušem* supported its member Nikandr Popov, who won 22.4% of votes and did not pass. Anatolii Popov, another ethnic Mari and member of the national movement, was selected as the deputy of the State Duma from the Mari El electoral district. The federal list of the LDPR received plurality of votes in the republic, followed by the Communists and Agrarians (Šarov 1994: 10–11). In the simultaneous municipal elections held in the republic, slightly more than half of the municipal deputies were ethnic Mari, but in urban districts, they were significantly underrepresented. Out of the 267 deputies elected to the three urban and seventeen rural district assemblies, there were 137 of ethnic Mari origin, 107 Russians and 23 others (see *Probuždenie* 1996b: 261).

3.3. 1994–1996: “We, the people.” Power sharing and difficulties in its institutionalization

A proportional ethnic representation in parliament tipped the balance to the side of the national movement in the establishment of some ethnic institutions and the adoption of a strong language law, which, among other things, demanded that public officials have the knowledge of either of the state languages needed for exercising their duties (Article 14, Law, 26 October 1995). However, as noted above, the composition of parliament did not guarantee the adoption of the design of the political system developed by President Zotin’s team. In order to solve this complication, Zotin proposed passing the constitution by a constitutional assembly made up of the republic’s deputies at the federal, republican and municipal levels. Many opponents, including the *Rus’* movement, were against the proposed procedure but did not have sufficient political weight to insist on a direct popular vote (see Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 58–59).

According to its preamble, the Constitution was passed on behalf of ‘the people of the Republic of Mari El’ and did not include any statement on sovereignty (Constitution, 24 June 1995). The constitution preserved the role of the president as the highest public official and the head of government, as well as the demand for him to know the state languages; 50 deputies of the parliament had to be elected in single mandate districts and 17 deputies in single districts formed in the administrative-territorial units (see Articles 65 and 76). In practice, this meant that 39 deputies had to be elected in urban areas and 28 in rural areas. The idea of the president, who proposed this exceptional solution, was inspired by the mechanism applied in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan and should have ensured the passage of the loyal heads of municipalities appointed by the president. However, in the Mari Republic, this appeared to be insufficient to push through loyal deputies. In the wake of social protests, many would-be deputies turned to criticism of the government in order to make it into parliament (see Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 59–61).

In the parliamentary elections in October 1996, only seventeen of the 67 new parliament members elected, or about a quarter, were of ethnic Mari origin. The drop in ethnic representation should be attributed to the decline in activities of the national movement after the dramatic worsening of the economic situation and the switch in the focus of protests to social issues. In its third congress in 1994, *Mari Ušem* transformed itself into a social-political organization in order to be eligible to participate in parliamentary elections. Some of its members, including Nikandr Popov and Gennadii Maksimov, saw this move as radicalization and left the organization, which entered a period of organizational difficulties. In 1994, Maksimov registered a political party, *Ušem*, which had no success in the elections. In 1995, the republican authorities forced *Kugeze Mlande* to stop its activities after its criticism of Zotin, along with an appeal to pass the independence act of Mari El and to stop the war in Chechnya (see Martjanov 2006). If in the 1993 parliamentary elections other parties and pressure groups also included ethnic Mari candidates into their lists and otherwise supported them in order to draw over votes from *Mari Ušem* and *Kugeze Mlande*, this time the mechanism did not work.

Only a few deputies elected to the State Assembly were affiliated with political parties due to the abolishment of the proportional part. Only the communists and their supporters managed to gain a noticeable number of seats, while most elected deputies were independents for whom the local networks mattered and ethnic voting was less important. It is not surprising, then, that the share of directors of public enterprises grew from less than a quarter in 1993 to more than a third. Directors of rural enterprises made up the bulk of the few elected ethnic Mari deputies. Among the deputies elected in the urban electoral districts, only a couple were ethnic Mari. A new group was 14 heads of rural administrations elected mostly in the administrative-territorial units, among whom five were ethnic Mari (my evaluation of ethnic representation is based on the data of Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 61–65). The parliament elected as its chairman Mikhail Zhukov, an ethnic Russian and former kolkhoz chief. Thus, a low proportion of ethnic Mari in white-collar jobs resulted in fewer seats in connection with the increase in the number of deputies.

Still, the central question was whether Zotin would manage to keep his post after the December 1996 elections. Perhaps his biggest challenge was the economic crisis that had led to different forms of social protest and gave ground for contenders to accuse him of failure in economic policy. Among many rallies, a November 1996 rally of pensioners whose money was trapped in banks due machinations was especially sound. Vjačeslav Kislicyn, who had recently joined the CPRF, became popular and was considered the likeliest challenger for the presidency. He was a kolkhoz chief and later the head of administration of the Medvedevskii rural district situated around Yoshkar-Ola and having a slight Russian majority. Between 1993 and 1995, Kislicyn was also an elected member of the Federation Council. After removal of the legal immunity associated with this position, a criminal case was initiated against him, the political motivation of which was clear. The case was dropped soon, as no evidence of violations was found, but the fact of his persecution only added to his popularity (see Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 66–67).

Leonid Markelov, a new face in the political landscape of the republic, became the second likeliest challenger. Since 1986, Markelov had worked in the Yoshkar-Ola Military Procuracy and after that as a barrister. In the early 1990s, he pursued some shady business activities and during the election campaign a criminal investigation was initiated against him, which, however, was a usual manner of dealing with political opponents. In the December 1995 Duma elections, the LDPR received plurality of votes in the republic followed by the communists. Thus, through the party lists, the leader of the LDPR regional division Markelov and a communist Sviniin became the deputies from the republic to the State Duma. The deputy status freed Markelov from criminal charges. Through personal competition, Nikolai Poliakov, an agrarian supported also by communists and a kolkhoz director, became the third State Duma deputy (see Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 60).

As noted, the republic was among the more left-leaning regions and in summer 1996, its population supported Ziuganov against Yeltsin in Russia's presidential elections. In the hope of increasing regional support for Yeltsin in the second round, Zotin introduced some urgent measures, including firing the head of Yeltsin's

regional election campaign office, Nikolai Rybakov, which was a blow to the national movement (see Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 60–61). Given the low results of the party of power in the Duma elections and the Russian presidential campaign, the federal centre was not satisfied with Zotin's performance and was not interested in his re-election, so he had to find support elsewhere.

In the 1996 republican presidential elections, Zotin hoped to win the support of the national movement. An obstacle to his plan to use this resource was the decline of the national movement by the mid-1990s. In order to mobilize the support of the national organizations, the fourth congress of the Mari people in October 1996 initiated the merger of *Mari Ušem* and *Mer Kanaš*, which, however, did not succeed. The congress supported the candidacy of the president in office. In his turn, Zotin agreed to the respective demand of *Mari Ušem* and, in October, added nationalities affairs to the areas of responsibilities of the ministry of culture, charging it with the task of developing a policy document in the field (which later became the Concept of the State Nationality Policy, 13 December 1997; Šarov 2001: 100). Nevertheless, the ethnic votes were split, because both Gennadii Maksimov and the previous contender for presidency, Anatolii Popov, also ran for candidacy.

The election campaign was marked by the conflict regarding the requirements for the president to have knowledge of both state languages. Kislicyn initially refused to take the language exam but later said he knew the colloquial language. Markelov built his campaign on criticism of economic policy and on the pretension to 'protect the national interests of the (ethnic) Russians'. He also argued that the language requirement was discriminatory and won his case on the matter in Russia's Supreme Court. Realizing the unlikelihood of his re-election, Zotin tried by decree to delay the date of the elections, making a controversial reference to the court's decision and causing a federation-wide scandal. The republic's procurator Nikolai Piksaev and the head of the republic's central electoral commission Zosim Ergubaev turned to the republic's Supreme Court, which found Zotin's decree to be illegal. The federal authorities also interfered, and, despite the decree, the elections started as originally planned on 22 December. In the morning of that day, the leader of *Mer Kanaš* Vasilii Pekteev appealed to the population to ignore the elections. However, the election took place, and Zotin could not pass even to the second round with just under 10% of the votes (for more details on the elections, see Zamyatin 2013b: 361–362).

3.4. 1997–1999: "The dictatorship of the fist." Establishing a monocentrist regime

In January 1997, Vjačeslav Kislicyn was elected the new president in the second round with 59% of the votes (see Zamyatin 2013b: 361–362). Kislicyn was popular in all rural districts. Markelov received 36% of the votes and won only in Yoshkar-Ola. An argument used against Markelov was that he was a newcomer to the republic. All in all, according to an expert's opinion, the elections were a struggle of personalities and not one of political platforms (Smirnov 1997).

In the aftermath of the elections, Markelov became the leader of the opposition, who stressed the republic's economic dependence on the federal centre and as the Duma deputy even lobbied for the inclusion of the republic in the list of subsidized regions. Among other problems, he pointed at human rights violations, meaning breaches of economic rights as a consequence of the 1998 economic crisis. In his turn, Kislicyn insisted on a policy to move towards the self-sufficiency of the republic. The treaty on the delimitation of areas of authority and power between federal and regional authorities was among the last to be signed, in May 1998.

Initially the distribution of powers among the elites remained largely intact. Many officials from the previous government were given positions in Kislicyn's government, but gradually the Zotin-era politicians were replaced with new ones. Among others, Mikhail Vasiutin, an ethnic Hill Mari, became the minister of culture instead of Viktor Nikolaev (Smirnov 1997). Gennadii Mustaeu, an ethnic Mari, lost his post as education minister. At the same time, Zosim Ergubaev, an ethnic Mari and hitherto head of the republic's central election commission, became the chair of the Constitutional Court. The creation of this body was stipulated in the constitution but was accomplished only in 1998. During his presidency, Kislicyn constantly rotated top officials without radically changing the balance between ethnic pressure groups.

Unlike his predecessor, Kislicyn managed to establish control over the legislature and, thus, created a monocentrist regime, which means that no separation of powers was left between the branches of the regional authority. His authoritarian style of leadership helped to sustain the regime without being choosy in its methods. Among the most prominent cases, Vjačeslav Paidoverov, an oppositional deputy of the regional parliament and the leader of the regional Human Rights Center, was beaten up in February 1999. At a seminar of the Moscow Helsinki Group, thirty human rights activists from the Russian regions signed an appeal to Russia's Procurator General Iurii Skuratov with the request to take the investigation into his hands, because, as it was stated, 'it is likely that law-enforcement agencies of Mari El would do it with a bias' (Smirnov 1999a). In September, the Moscow Helsinki Group presented the book *Reports on the Human Rights Situation in the Republic of Mari El 1998–1999*, prepared under the coordination of Paidoverov. Two years later, Paidoverov died under suspicious circumstances in a car accident.

In the 1999 State Duma electoral campaign, Leonid Markelov quickly became a favorite and expressed his ambition to become the next president, too. Realizing the danger, Kislicyn tried to establish control over the mass media. State-funded newspapers had to re-register as state enterprises, and as a consequence, editors-in-chief now had to be appointed and not elected by the editorial board as they had been previously (Smirnov 1999b). In early December, under the pretext of 'low signal quality', the authorities stopped broadcasting the popular Radio-M and the signal was not launched again until 31 December, when one of the listed conditions was met with Elena Rogachova leaving her job as editor of the radio's news service.

Access to regional official media was closed for Markelov. However, private media continued to appear and "Markelov's block" issued a newspaper of the same title. He emphasized now and again his sympathy to Vladimir Putin, who in autumn

had become Russia's prime minister, and his vision for a strong Russia and its control of regions. In the campaign, a great deal of compromising materials were spread in the mass media and over the internet. Markelov claimed that two members of his electoral team were killed, the driver of one of his assistants and an activist. The rural district procurator insisted that the latter was a case of domestic violence, but the perpetrators were never found (Smirnov 1999c).

On 19 December 1999, Markelov lost his mandate of State Duma deputy to Ivan Kazankov, an agrarian and kolkhoz director, an ethnic Chuvash. The latter was supported by the republican authorities and enjoyed enormous coverage in the republican mass media, despite the words of Kislicyn in one of the interviews given somewhat earlier that an ethnic Mari should represent the republic in the State Duma. The national organizations also had two ethnic Mari candidates, former minister of the interior Vasilii Grigoriev, who had just been fired by the president, and the sitting deputy of the State Duma Nikolai Poliakov. However, the former collected only about 3.5% of the votes while the result for the latter was below 2% (Smirnov 1999c).

Markelov left the republic, because after losing his legal immunity as the State Duma deputy, he could be arrested, and after the defeat, there were no prospects for him to win the presidential campaign. In an interview after his defeat, he said, 'After this campaign I started to respect Kislicyn. I understood that he had learned how to work in the territory. To buy the strong, to beat the weak, to befool the fools. And everything works out, despite his complete failure in socio-economic policy' (Pančenko 1999).

4. The dynamics of the ethnopolitical processes in Mari El in the 2000s

4.1. 2000: "Only a bullet would stop me." Political change towards recentralization

Immediately after the regional elections, a new struggle started in Mari El over who would lead the regional campaign for Putin's support in Russia's upcoming March 2000 presidential elections. Kislicyn intended to keep the leading position for his allies and expressed his personal support for Putin. Vasilii Pekteev became vice-chair of the political movement *Unity*, a precursor to *United Russia* (Smirnov 2000).

In December 1999, simultaneously with the State Duma elections, municipal elections were held, in which ethnic Mari again won more than half of the seats of municipal deputies (Šarov 2001: 99–100). A conflict emerged because Kislicyn wanted to re-establish control over the municipalities and thereby to ensure his re-election as president. In March 2000, some elected heads of municipalities, including the mayors of Yoshkar-Ola and Volzhsk, submitted an appeal to Putin to introduce a 'direct presidential rule' because of the dire economic conditions. Initially, Kislicyn managed to press for a change in the constitution in order to be able to appoint the heads of municipalities. However, the Supreme Court of the republic and the Supreme Court of Russia ruled that the mixed principle of elections contradicted the federal legislation. The electoral districts had to be redrawn (Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 71–74).

This ruling triggered the start in summer of a campaign to bring the regional legislation into concordance with the federal legislation also in Mari El. This process resulted in the abolishment of the sovereignty declaration on 10 November 2000, amendments to the republican constitution in December 2000 and the denouncement of the power-sharing treaty on 9 July 2001. While in some other regions a conflict emerged between federal and regional authorities, Kislicyn expressed his full support for the policy. This step, however, did not result in him gaining federal support for the elections. Moreover, Mari El was a rare region where the federal authorities directly interfered in order to avoid the re-election of the president in office. In autumn, numerous federal inspections took place and found a critical economic situation in the republic, a fact which was used against Kislicyn (see Matsuzato 2003: 17–18).

The social structure of the new parliament elected in October 2000 had not principally changed in comparison with the previous one. The party representation remained negligent. In June 2000, the fifth Congress of the Mari People stressed the need to ensure ethnic representation in the forthcoming parliamentary elections and expressed its support for ethnic Mari candidates. It elected Viktor Nikolaev to be the leader of *Mer Kanaš*. Before the elections, the amendments to the constitution abolished the previously formed territorial and administrative-territorial electoral districts as part of the legislative amendments campaign, which resulted in the removal of extra rural seats. Therefore, there were significantly fewer agrarians and heads of local administrations among the deputies, the two groups with a higher proportion of ethnic Mari. Nonetheless, eighteen deputies, or less than a third, were of ethnic Mari origin, or about the same amount as in the previous parliament. Kislicyn's team managed to defeat most of his opponents (Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 77–82). Minakov was elected chair of the State Council and has managed to keep this position through all the following elections until this day due to the same qualities: loyalty and a lack of ambition to become the first figure himself.

In the 2000 republican presidential election campaign, aware of his falling ratings, Kislicyn tried to draw the date of the elections nearer, from December to October. However, the federal authorities were against this move. Putin's plenipotentiary representative in the Volga federal district Sergei Kirienko made it clear that he would not allow the re-election of Kislicyn. Kislicyn famously stated, 'I will not refuse to participate in the elections... Only a bullet would stop me.' At the beginning of his presidency, Kislicyn distanced himself from the communists without leaving the party, but nonetheless, they supported him. He tried to win over the support of the national movement by proposing the post of vice-president to an ethnic Mari. However, against this plan emerged Ivan Teterin, an ethnic Mari and an army officer, head of the Emergencies Ministry's North Caucasus Regional Center, whose candidacy was supported by the organization *Mari National Congress*. In addition, he was supported by the *Unity* party directly from its Moscow headquarters and not through the party's regional division controlled by Kislicyn's people. The federal authorities supported the republic's interior minister Anatolii Ivanov (Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 82–83).

In the first round on 3 December 2000, nobody obtained the majority of votes and the two favorites were Markelov with 29.2% and Kislicyn with 25.2%. Despite having federal support, Teterin was only in third place, with 18.8% of the votes, while rural areas inhabited largely by ethnic Mari voted overwhelmingly for him. Anatolii Ivanov came in fourth with less than 10%. In the second round, on 17 December 2000, the *Unity* party and most other opposition forces supported Markelov. The federal centre was forced to support Markelov despite his alleged criminal connections, because Kislicyn was considered the worst choice. Markelov won with 58% of the votes against Kislicyn's 33% (Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 84–86).

4.2. 2001–2004: “To buy the strong, to beat the weak, to befool the fools”. Redistribution of power and growing tensions

In January 2001, Leonid Markelov was inaugurated as president. The new president came with his own team, and the ministers of the new government were mostly newcomers. At the transitional stage, ethnic parity was preserved among the first vice-premiers and vice-premiers, but only the ministers of culture, agriculture and economics were of ethnic Mari origin. The following year, Markelov promoted two Muscovites to be the appointed regional representatives and the members of the Federation Council according to a new order. In the years to come, minister of culture Mikhail Vasiutin (until present) and minister of agriculture Aleksandr Iegoshin (until recently) have been the only two top executive officials of ethnic Mari origin. Their fields of responsibility graphically demonstrate the niche envisaged for the titular elite (my evaluation of ethnic representation is based, *inert alia*, on the data of Belokurova & Denisova 2003: 88–89).

Markelov used the first years of his presidency to strengthen his power. As was the case with Putin, Markelov started with a takeover of the press. As promised during the election campaign, Markelov lobbied for financial support from Moscow. The next year, federal subsidies constituted half of the republican budget and the economic situation of the republic improved. As in other regions, the change in leadership led to extensive property redistribution. A number of measures were taken specifically against ethnic elites, not only against their business interests but also against the position of the Mari language and culture in the public sphere. For example, the compulsory study of the Mari language as a state language and its use as a language of instruction in the republic were removed, while the funds assigned in executive programs for language policy implementation were dozens of times lower than those provided in other Finno-Ugric republics, both in absolute terms and per capita (see Zamyatin 2014b: 252–253).

On 22 February 2002, national organizations arranged a rally demanding an end to the interference with the freedom of the press and deciding to arrange an extraordinary Congress of the Mari people. In March 2002, handpicked loyalists registered a *Mari National Congress*, which was intended to be a pocket pro-government national organization of the republican authorities (Nyman 2006: 49). This organization arranged a meeting of the Mari cultural centres in the auspices of the State

Assembly on 20 April 2002, several days before an extraordinary sixth Congress of the Mari People was held on 26 April. Furthermore, on 16 April, Viktor Nikolaev, the leader of *Mer Kanaš* was beaten up and taken to the hospital. The congress organizers had received neither the possibility to hold it as usually in the Shketan Theater, nor funding from the republican budget for arranging it, as had been provided for the previous congresses. The congress passed a resolution against president Markelov and requested that he leave the post voluntarily (Suslov 2002). On 11 October of the same year, Nikolaev was beaten again.

The main opposition force continued to be the communists, led by Ivan Kazankov who, however, lost his position as the State Duma deputy in 2004 to Markelov's crony, Muscovite Valerii Komissarov, who was well known as the host of a television show and was running with the support of *United Russia* (Poduzova 2003). The mayor of Yoshkar-Ola backed Kazankov. As was the case in the previous years, a conflict began between the president and the heads of municipal administrations, first of all, of Yoshkar-Ola and Volzhsk. As a result of the municipal reform initiated by Markelov, heads of administrations began to be elected by the district councils and not by the population. Several people were beaten; the mayor of Volzhsk was even put in jail for alleged financial infringements (Kynev 2009: 130). Another tactical step of Markelov's team was that they not only backed *United Russia* but also took over leadership of the regional committee of the Agrarian Party, which could pull over votes from the opposition parties (Ivančenko et al. 2006).

On 27 March 2004, the seventh Congress of the Mari People was held at the Shketan Mari National Theater with three hundred delegates and two hundred guests, among whom were government officials from the republic and other regions with compact Mari settlement. Greetings were announced from President Markelov and the head of parliament Minakov. Unlike at the previous 2002 congress, this congress did not pass a resolution against president of the republic Leonid Markelov, although this was an election year. Still, the resolution criticized the nationalities policy and especially the cadre policy, which was said to ignore the national specifics of the republic. However, the resolution also included a clause on the need to suggest joint action plans to the government and to participate in their implementation. Despite the ideas pronounced at the congress about the need to cooperate with authorities, in an expert's assessment, the position of the national movement leadership towards president Markelov remained irreconcilable. Its leaders intended to support an ethnic Mari candidate for presidency against Markelov. The congress elected Vladimir Kozlov (Lajd Šemjer) as the *Oniyzha*, a spiritual leader and simultaneously the head of *Mer Kanaš* (Šarov 2005: 205–206).

A peculiarity of the parliamentary and presidential election campaign of the next round in 2004 was that the term of the coming parliament and president was prolonged to five years. A mixed principle was introduced also in Mari El, which increased the importance of political parties. The number of deputies was cut to 52, half of whom had to be elected from the party lists and half in single-mandate districts. The State Assembly elections were held on 10 October 2004. The elections proved to be a relatively competitive exercise. The *United Russia* party list received

32% of votes and the communists 18%, but *United Russia* candidates won in three quarters of the plurality districts, where it is easiest to use so-called administrative resources, that is, the mechanisms that allow using one's official position to influence the outcomes of elections. A total of 31 (later 34) deputies formed a *United Russia* faction, while a few deputies from the communists, agrarians, *Just Russia* and the LDPR also made it into parliament (Kynev 2009: 129–131). Eleven deputies, or about a fifth, were of ethnic Mari origin. Therefore, Markelov fulfilled the task of the federal centre to ensure victory of the party of power and could face the coming presidential elections without fear.

A peculiarity of the December 2004 presidential elections was that the national movement acted as a separate political force. The national organizations supported Mikhail Dolgov, an ethnic Mari and former employee of the Foreign Intelligence Service who had worked 'in the Western countries' and came from Moscow to participate in the elections (Šarov 2006: 119). On 19 December 2004, Markelov won his second term with 57% of the votes in the first round. Dolgov came in second with a result of 18.7%. The average turnover was 63.6%, while in some rural districts it was 80%. As was the case elsewhere, administrative resources were used heavily, such as extensive control over regional media and local authorities and even electoral fraud to reach the needed election results. Like the other opposition candidates, 'Dolgov was prevented from conducting an effective campaign because of restricted access to media and public meeting facilities' (IHR 2006: 46).

On the same day, 19 December, when according to Markelov the results of the election were not yet known, President Putin in a symbolic gesture awarded Markelov with an Order of Friendship by his decree 'for a large contribution to the socio-economic development of the republic, strengthening friendship and co-operation between the peoples' (Šarov 2005: 203). In other words, Markelov acquired his mandate from Moscow and received *carte blanche*.

4.3. 2005–2009: "Neither left nor right." From confrontation to consolidation of the regime

In January 2005, the presidential representative in the Volga federal district Sergei Kirienko commented, as he gave a pair of felt boots as his present at the inauguration, 'Markelov is a confident centrist, and *valenki* is the only footwear which has neither left nor right.' On 23 December 2004, an extraordinary Congress of the Mari People was organized to protest against electoral fraud. At the time of the inauguration, the national activists organized a rally against the cadre policy of the president. In February, the leader of *Mer Kanaš* Vladimir Kozlov was beaten up. This triggered an international campaign of criticism and culminated in a resolution passed by the European Parliament that criticized breaches of the rights of ethnic Mari (Resolution, 12 May 2005).

Despite the international scandal, the persecutions continued later that year and several more beatings became known (Nyman 2006: 48–53). Besides this, in the rural areas with the majority support for Dolgov, 'heads of local administrations, school

directors, and teachers were held responsible for the poor scoring of the incumbent president in these areas and [were] dismissed or pressured to resign' (Ibid., 46). The appointment of loyal people can also be understood as a step towards strengthening the regime by establishing the clientelist network. At the same time, the republican authorities denied any wrongdoing and reported, inter alia, that, 'as of the beginning of 2005, ethnic Mari held 29% of leading and other top positions within state and local public service' (*Sbornik* 2005: 42-43). The federal authorities backed the position of the republican authorities. In its declaration, the State Duma stated that between 2002 and 2005, the share of ethnic Mari among the republican and municipal chief officials had grown from 26.9% to 32.6% (Declaration of the State Duma, 10 June 2005). This is a selective representation of data and misleading without its disaggregation, because the ethnic Mari officials are mostly concentrated at the municipal level, where the Mari are in the majority. A decade later, the picture has not changed and ethnic Russians constitute probably about 68% of the ruling elites in Mari El (Romanov & Stepanov 2013: 38-39).

In the following years, the authorities chose the tactic of taking control over the leadership of national organizations. They instigated a criminal case against Nina Maksimova, head of *Mari Ušem* since April 2005, alleging that she had distributed extremist materials, and tried to shut down *Mari Ušem* itself under the pretext of organizational violations. In December 2007, Kozlov himself in the name of *Mer Kanaš* addressed the president, asking for organizational and financial assistance in arranging and holding the eighth Congress of the Mari People. As a result, the congress was arranged 'in co-operation' with the authorities, which in practice meant that the authorities took over its organization. The first vice-premier and minister of culture Mikhail Vasiutin, who by that time remained one of two ethnic Mari among the government members, headed the congress' organizing committee. In 2008, president Markelov was also present at the congress. Expressing his disagreement with the manner of organizing the congress, Kozlov refused to run as a candidate and Larisa Iakovleva became the next head of *Mer Kanaš*. Kozlov remained the *Oniyzha* because for religious reasons a woman was said to be unfit (see Knorre & Konstantinova 2010). A year earlier, in 2007, Iakovleva, an ethnic Mari and a loyalist to Markelov, was elected deputy of the State Duma from the *United Russia* party.

The October 2009 parliamentary elections were again marked by gross violations and the use of administrative resources. Ivan Kazankov, leader of the regional communists, the main opposition force, was put under criminal investigation. The biggest scandal was caused by various obstacles inflicted by the authorities in order to complicate the visit of the CPRF leader Ziuganov to Mari El. The communists organized a meeting, the first in years, which was dispersed by force (Suslov 2009). The *United Russia* party list received almost two thirds of all votes and all seats from plurality districts except one. The first on the regional party list was Markelov, who had joined the party in 2007, and the second was Iakovleva. *United Russia* received 44 deputy seats in the State Assembly, the CPRF five and the LDPR two, inter alia, due to an increase of the entry threshold for parties to 7% (Kynev 2009: 509). Fifteen of the elected deputies, or less than a third, were of ethnic Mari origin.

United Russia won and, according to the new procedure enforced by the federal authorities, in December 2009, Russia's president nominated the head of this party's regional list, Markelov, to the State assembly to be appointed president of the republic.

4.4. 2010–2015: “We will dismantle the road and leave”. Stagnation

At a personal meeting in 2012, when Markelov invited Putin to visit Yoshkar-Ola and see for himself what had become “a Western town”, the latter answered that, “We do not need a Western town, we need our own” (Suslov 2013: 118). This episode captures quite well the combination of nationalism, conservatism and isolationism that marked Putin's third term in office and is also relevant from the perspective of ethnopolitics. It additionally captures the changed landscape of Yoshkar-Ola. Federal subsidies were spent on the reconstruction of the centre of Yoshkar-Ola, which traditionally voted for Markelov. Construction was allegedly his family business and a few of his cronies had recently come under corruption charges. A mixture of the pseudo-renaissance centre, combining western architectural styles from considerably diverging époques and cultural spheres, with Russian represented in the redbrick Kremlin and numerous Orthodox churches, had turned the city into an element of symbolic and cultural domination (see McGarry 2010: 38–39). A rare ornament on wooden fences is all one can identify as Mari.

Markelov also attended the ninth Congress of the Mari People in 2012. The congress elected Anatolii Ivanov, namesake of the former interior minister and the vice-chairman of the State Council, as the head of *Mer Kanaš* and the *Oniyzha*. Kozlov received about a third of the votes. Iakovleva continued to be the State Duma deputy with a break in 2011–2013. In 2014, she became the head of the new federal national-cultural autonomy of the Maris. Minority organizations of groups of Maris traditionally settled in other regions acted quite independently and had legitimacy to express criticism towards the leadership of the titular republic. The creation of an umbrella organization in the form of the national-cultural autonomy subordinated this source of potential dissent. Therefore, the national organizations in the republic and other regions fell under full control of the authorities.

The September 2014 parliamentary elections were not much different from the previous ones in terms of electoral fraud. The *United Russia* party list received 65% of votes and all seats from plurality districts. *United Russia* received 46 deputy seats, the CPRF four and the LDPR two. *Just Russia*, which had Vladimir Kozlov on its list, did not receive any seats. Eleven of the elected deputies, or one fifth, were of ethnic Mari origin.

In 2011, the title of the republic's presidential post was changed to that of ‘head of the republic’, as was also done in other republics. In January 2015, after a short period of uncertainty, Putin appointed Markelov as a temporarily acting head of the republic until the elections in September 2015, thereby identifying him as the favourite supported by the Kremlin. Due to an amendment to the federal law that started to count the two-term restriction anew since the re-establishment of gubernatorial elections in 2012, Markelov could again participate in the elections. One month before

elections, *Mer Kanaš* supported Markelov's candidacy 'who proved his ability to lead the region and uphold the interest of the Mari people and the republic' (*Mariiskaia Pravda* 13 August 2015).

A scandal was widely publicized in the federal news channels when, during his election campaign, Markelov threatened to 'dismantle the road' in a village where, in his opinion, the inhabitants had not greeted him 'as warmly as in other places'. The opposition, including Dolgov, supported the communist candidate, who was from the neighbouring Kirov Region and, nonetheless, received almost a third of votes. Markelov won in the first round, however, unlike heads of the neighbouring republics, only with a slight margin of under one per cent (50.8%). The media reported mass irregularities during the elections and both the communists and LDPR alleged electoral fraud after the publication of the results.

5. From power sharing to ethnic domination: a discussion

5.1. Power sharing and proportional representation

In 1990, the temporary weakness of the federal centre opened a window of opportunity for ethnic *nomenklatura* in the ethnic regions to take power and increase the self-governance of republics through sovereignization based on the Soviet legacy of institutionalized ethnicity. This was also the case in the Mari Republic, where the CPSU functionary and Supreme Council chair Vladislav Zotin personified the shift of power from the CPSU regional committee to the Supreme Council. Zotin increased his power by becoming the first president of the republic and effectively controlling the executive authorities. However, the Supreme Council acted quite independently, which led to a confrontation between the branches of power that lasted until the dissolution of the Supreme Councils after the 1993 constitutional crisis in Russia.

Ethnic mobilization inspired some ethnic voting and not only brought a deputy seat for *Mari Ušem* in the December 1993 regional parliamentary elections, but more importantly, ensured the support and inclusion of ethnic Mari candidates by other parties and pressure groups. An analysis of the election results demonstrates that, while the nationalist program could not attract Russian voters, on several occasions in the early 1990s, up to a third of ethnic Mari votes went to nationalist candidates. A benefit of proportional ethnic representation for the ethnic elites was their ability to bargain for favourable conditions in a power-sharing agreement. Substantial ethnic representation mattered, for example, when discussing ethnic and linguistic issues in the process of passing the constitution. The adoption of the constitution jointly by an assembly consisting of the republican deputies to the federal and regional parliaments as well as municipal deputies, among whom the titular elite was in the majority, led, inter alia, to the inclusion of language requirements for presidency candidates.

At the same time, after the fall of communism, ideology, be it communism, nationalism or liberalism, never played a major role in republican politics. Political parties did not have much weight in regions, where multiplicity of parties was

developing only slowly (see Krajnov 1995). The population was primarily ideologically uninspired, with the exception of some partisans of the communist ideology. Given the economic troubles, it is unsurprising, then, that the republic was typically clustered among the regions of the ‘Red Belt’ with a noticeable support for the communist party and, allied to it, the agrarian party, the latter expressing rather a group interest, and only moderate support for the ‘party of power’. Protest voting was the strongest, however, when the votes regularly went to the LDPR. Regional political elites preferred to belong to a ‘party of power’ and pragmatically focused on preserving its exclusive access to power. It was membership among the elites that led to ethnic political representation.

In the mid-1990s, the stabilization of political institutions marked a turn from mass politics to elitist politics. The national movement entered a period of decline, because instead of public protests ethnic issues could be now raised by conventional political contestation through participation in political institutions. Ethnic activists themselves listed such reasons for failure of their electoral campaign as ‘political passivity on the part of many Mari, limited ethnic solidarity in the voting behavior of Mari citizens and a lack of Mari politicians who have sufficient financial and other resources needed to engage in successful election campaigning at the republican level’ (Nyman 2006: 45). The decline of the agrarians and the passage of new economic elites into the legislature had as one of its consequences a low level of ethnic representation that was never able to regain its level of proportionality (see Table 1).

Ethnicity	1993–1996	1996–2000	2000–2004	2004–2009	2009–2014	2014–2019
Mari	13	17	18	11	15	11
Russian	14	39	41	31	29	33
Tatar	2	4	5	4	1	4
Chuvash	0	2	3	3	5	3
other	1	5	0	3	2	1
In total	30	67	67	52	52	52

Table 1. Data on Ethnicity of the Deputies of the State Council (based on *Pasport* 2015: 12).

At the same time, ethnic voting still mattered in the very personalized elections of the president, because when certain presidential candidates appealed to the voters of the titular group, other candidates could not ignore the topic as it could potentially mobilize almost half of voters. For the same reason, even the change in the republican leadership in 1996, when an ethnic Russian incumbent won, did not significantly change the level of ethnic participation in the government. The winner became the dominant actor but took into account the factor of popular ethnic support also in the next elections. This compromise enabled the inclusion of different segments in the winning coalition, and ethnic elites were also given their share of ministerial portfolios.

The common roots of the political elites that originated in the *nomenklatura* ensured a degree of consensus regarding the balancing of ethnic interests in practice,

although due to antidiscrimination clauses this could not be formalized in the legal-institutional framework. The republic's population was portrayed as a polyethnic integrated society with no inter-ethnic conflicts. The interests of 'the peoples of the republic' had to be represented only through their public associations (see Concept of the State Nationality Policy, 13 December 1997). However, the republic's ethnic composition provided only a dual balance of power that inspired competition.

The presence of the Tatar segment was a stabilizing factor and more important than one could have expected based on the relatively small size of the community, because support from the neighbouring Republic of Tatarstan reinforced the influence of the community. This influence can be discerned not only from overrepresentation in parliament but even more so from overrepresentation in government, which to this day has practically always included ethnic Tatars. Nonetheless, the Tatar community has not become a sufficiently significant third actor to sustain the balance of ethnic groups in the long run. As a result, a consensual type of the republican leadership soon transformed into a conflictual type, which, under the conditions of a monocentrist regime, resulted in the marginalization of the opposition groups.

5.2. Ethnic domination through exclusion and confrontation

The strategy of electoral counter-mobilization of Russian voters proved to be effective in the 2000 presidential elections in Mari El, *inter alia*, because it coincided with the change of the leader in Moscow. The election of the new leader in the Kremlin in effect annulled previous pacts between the federal and regional elites. The subordination of regional chief executives was the first task in the new Kremlin agenda of the 'power vertical'. The coinciding change also in the republican leadership is interesting only in that it simplified the implementation of the Kremlin agenda in the republic, which otherwise would have taken longer but would have been achieved sooner or later anyway. The recentralization and establishment of the 'power vertical' not only significantly cut the scope of regional self-governance but also gave the regional ruling elites some new possibilities for establishing control over public space.

The peculiarity in Mari El was that the change in power in the early 2000s led to the creation of a system of ethnic control. This is a peculiarity because a forced choice of the federal centre was to agree to a significant dominance of titular elites in Chechnya and some other republics in exchange for loyalty, because they were able to provide stability in troublesome regions. The federal authorities intervened for the first time in the Mari El presidential elections in 1996. Mari El began to be seen by the Kremlin as a troublesome region especially after the conflict of the 2000s. However, here ethnic grievances were very unlikely to turn into an inter-ethnic conflict, and in a tactical decision, the Kremlin put its stake in the strongest actor, who proved to be able to provide the loyalty and stability the Kremlin wanted from him. For that reason, the same person is still in office fifteen years later despite all of the economic troubles. As in some other regions, the political regime in Mari El since the 2000s can be characterized by the formula of 'winner takes all' (see Galljamov 2003: 315–316). However, the period of Markelov's presidency was characterized by a harsher authoritarian regime than in Russia on average (see Suslov 2011, 2013).

The data on ethnic representation in the State Assembly of the Republic of Mari El confirm the conclusions of a comparative study on ethnic representation in Muslim republics that also reported the patterns of overrepresentation of the dominant group in regional legislative assemblies. Grigorii Golosov attributed these patterns to the logic of non-politicization of cleavages when the dominant group controls all electorally important parties and downplays the ethnic issue in their agenda, which leads to under-representation of sizeable subordinate groups. At the same time, the smaller Muslim minority a region had, the more balanced representation it was reported to achieve, because without the fear of competition, political parties were more willing to include minority candidates in their lists (see Golosov 2012: 105).

It seems that minority strategy is a mirror image of the domination strategy described by Golosov. Typically the ethnic elites in the republics with the titular group in the numerical minority put their stakes in the key players among those who run as candidates for power positions. As a result, when one of them wins, at least some members of ethnic elites are co-opted and participate in power coalitions. In other words, ethnic elites in a weak position tend to spread support across political parties and interest groups but tend to concentrate their support on one in a strong position.

In the republic with a nearly equal size of the major ethnic groups, the Mari national movement perceived itself sufficiently strong to act as a separate force and to choose the strategy of mobilization of ethnic votes. However, this rational choice based on the ability of the national movement to produce ethnic voting turned to be also its curse. The mistake was to see the root of all evil in the person holding office as the president of the republic and not to see the events in the republic as a manifestation of a broader federal strategy of building the 'power vertical'. When their candidate lost, members of ethnic elites found themselves squeezed out from government offices especially after the 2004 elections. While in the 1990s, more than two thirds of the republican and municipal top officials had been of ethnic Mari origin, in the 2000s their share dropped to under one third.

It seems that the national question becomes especially acute when the size of the main ethnic groups is more or less equal. Evidence was provided that the situation was prone to conflict between groups of elites that could take on an inter-ethnic dimension. Despite the democratization of the 1990s, the regional political elites continued to be the key actors in the regional political processes. The conflict in Mari El in the 2000s was a conflict of elites. The reason for the conflict was that those groups of elites who found themselves in a disadvantaged position after losing the elections were dissatisfied with the redistribution of political and material resources and confronted the ruling elite. In this way, the conflict became a conflict between the power holders and the opposition. Those who became the ruling elite began to redistribute material resources at the expense of the previous functionaries. Among the many functionaries who lost their posts, also members of ethnic elites were deprived of access to political resources. The conflict acquired an ethnic dimension, because the frontline between those in power and the opposition happened along ethnic lines. In effect, the change among those in power also brought about a regime of ethnic domination.

5.3. Ethnic domination through co-optation and consolidation

The established regional variety of the authoritarian regime intended to maintain power, and a further strategy was to prevent conflicts like the one there was from happening ever again. Analysis of the political developments demonstrated that the suppression of mass media, persecutions and even killings of the opponents, and appeals to human rights were among the methods used in political confrontation in Mari El also earlier, but their use peaked in the 2000s. According to Golosov's study, a lack of political participation actualized a threat of marginalization of the ethnic elite in the case of ethnic Muslims, because politicians especially under authoritarian regimes evoked anti-ethnic rhetoric for political ends (Golosov 2014: 225–226).

In the second half of the 2000s, consolidation of regional elites was imposed, perhaps following instructions from Moscow in the aftermath of the international scandal of 2005. Some ethnic elites began to be represented again, because the regime realized the importance of co-optation as a mechanism of control. Government officials are chosen on professional grounds and are not formally supposed to represent any groups in the sense that parliamentarians or members of public consultative bodies might. Yet, officials like Vasiutin, Ivanov and Iakovleva specifically perform the function of symbolic ethnic participation because they are viewed as legitimate representatives of the titular group. The deficiency of this form of participation is that officials are not accountable to the ethnic group they pretend to represent, but rather to their patrons and, thus, they reinforce the system of vertical control (see Prina 2012: 94). Remarkable is the scarcity of officials of the titular ethnic origin co-opted to occupy weighty positions. Furthermore, authorities have virtually taken over and control national organizations as a potential source of dissent. Therefore, the manageability of the ethnic network was enforced through its hierarchization and insertion into the 'power vertical'.

As a result, exchange for loyalty in terms of substantial representation remains rather bleak. The funds provided for institutional support for the titular language and culture since the 2000s have been negligible and are dozens of times lower than in other Finno-Ugric republics (see Zamyatin 2014b: 203, 215–217). This is an illustrious indicator of how ethnic differences are not taken into account and some previously installed accommodationist devices have actually been removed, for example, the native language as the medium of instruction. The republic is maintained but has lost its ethnic characteristics as a result of deliberate efforts toward the depoliticization of ethnicity. However, when everything public is interpreted as political, ethnicity is forced out from the public sphere, which is a characteristic of an integrationist agenda. Moreover, this experience demonstrates that in an integrationist federation, ethnic minority regions can actually function as a device of domination, making it possible to pursue not only an integrationist and but also an assimilationist policy.

Therefore, contrary to the institutionalist explanation, the republic ceased to function as an ethnic institution. Regional power sharing was not fixed in ethnic political institutions and was easy to dismantle. Under domination, an element of power sharing was maintained but served as the mechanism of control through the

co-optation of ethnic elites in patronage networks formed, for example, on associations of fellow-countrymen and/or co-ethnics. The key role of power networks in enabling ethnic participation also demonstrates a limited explanatory value of the institutionalist perspective that does not take such practices into account. The instrumentalist accounts come closer, but also have limits in explaining behaviour of elites in the situation under authoritarian rule. While ethnic elites use power networks to gain their share of power, they are not free to pursue their agenda but have to balance particular interests in order to remain within the networks.

Ethnic clienteles were said to contribute to authoritarian tendencies and the establishment of authoritarian regimes, first of all, in the republics. However, the findings of this study point to a complicated relation between ethnicity and political arrangements. There is no one-dimensional relation between democracy and minority participation, because social cohesion is a precondition for effective governance not only in a democratic but also in an authoritarian state (see McGarry 2010: 36). Also in a democratic regime, minority rights could be deprived, while in an authoritarian regime, as that in Russia, national minorities can still enjoy access to power in their titular republics.

6. Conclusion

Since the Soviet times, ethnic identity has been a significant source of solidarity in forming pressure groups among regional political actors, although not as significant alone as in correlation with religion. Popular support for nationalism ensured that the titular elites had access to the positions among the ruling elites in many ethnic republics in post-Soviet Russia. However, the Mari national movement was not successful in attracting popular support for nationalism through ethnic mobilization and had only moderate influence, when measured by its ability to produce ethnic voting. As a result, the national movement largely failed to achieve its goals, including the attempts to institutionalize ethnicity through such initiatives as the introduction of linguistic requirements from public servants.

Yet, the ruling elite structure in Mari El in the 1990s tended to reflect the ethnic composition of the republic's population. It was argued in this study that political representation was sustained not so much via the direct impact of activities of the national movement on ethnic voting, as via its indirect impact on the agenda setting and on power distribution among the regional elite groups. In the 1990s, *Mari Ušem* largely failed to win seats, but its activities inspired various political parties and pressure groups to include titular candidates in their rows.

More importantly, the publicly presented demands of the national movement for political representation ensured a better bargaining position of the ethnic segment of the *nomenklatura*. The common roots of regional elites in the *nomenklatura* provided grounds for co-operation, and their common interest in achieving greater self-governance vis-à-vis the federal centre in conjunction with the shared legacy of ethnic proportional representation became the necessary conditions for continued power sharing along ethnic lines.

Yet, as predicted by Arend Lijphart, the political regime based on power sharing in the conditions of the dual balance of power between the communities proved to be unstable also in Mari El. Despite the establishment of a centralized authoritarian regime in Russia and its regions, the titular elites continued to be in control of some republics, while power sharing continued to work in other republics. It was not so much federal interference but the regional politics, where power sharing was an alternative method to ethnic control. Thus, the establishment of ethnic domination in Mari El was not a result of the turn to authoritarianism and resubordination of the republic to the federal centre, even if in Mari El the processes coincided. Neither was it an outcome of imposed consolidation of regional elites resulting in a monocentrist regime, at least in the short run.

All in all, it has been argued in this study that it was the emergence of conflictual political culture in the situation of uncertainty of the early 1990s that determined to a large extent the political developments in the republic and mainly contributed to the establishment of ethnic domination in Mari El. The competition between the segments of elites resulted in a conflict that was solved through a 'winner takes all' strategy by marginalizing the competitors. Since the 2000s, a combination of the elements of ethnic control and the encouragement of voluntary assimilation resulted in a low representation of the titular group in Mari El. Under ethnic domination, the goal of elimination of differences and convergence of ethnic groups through assimilation was combined with dependence and co-optation elements of control. Accordingly, co-optation of elites into patronage networks ensured some participation of the titular elite.

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