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Izvatas cultural identification and self-determination: The study of the “Lud” tradition

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Izvatas are a separate group of the Finno-Ugric Komi people, dispersedly inhabiting the vast territories of the Russian North. In the 1920s the policy of 'korenizacija' aimed at unifying all the Komi people by downplaying the groups' diversity. As a result, 70 years later the apparent consolidation deprived the Izvatas of the possibility to acquire the status of an Indigenous small-numbered people. The greater prevalence of the Izhma Komi ethnic identity in the early 2000s revealed the ambivalence in self-description as a group, both internally and externally. While some Izvatas have identified themselves as a northern subgroup of the Komi Zyryan people, others have been claiming their ethnic distinctiveness. At the same time, the mere belonging to the group has been contested as well. Recognising the phenomenon of fluid, blended and multiple ethnicities, none of these perspectives can be dismissed and thus need to be perceived as valid. In this paper, we analyse the meaning of the “Lud” festival tradition for constructing and representing Izvatas' distinct, yet unified, identity across the group divide. In this context, we argue that the recognition of the “Lud” celebration as the cultural heritage of Izhma Komi can facilitate the recognition of the community as such. In the end, we demonstrate that cultural heritage listings may become a valid tool for the wider cultural and political self-determination interests of Izvatas.

Introduction

The Bolshevik revolution and the introduced policy of *korenizacija* aimed at the inclusion of non-Russian nationalities into the hierarchies of the newly formed Soviet state provided an opportunity to exercise the right of national self-determination (Martin & Martin, 2001). Allocation of national territories, the formation of national elites, and the development of national culture and language determined the policy of the USSR in the 1920s (Shabaev & Istomin, 2017). In combination with the denial of religious and ideological pluralism, *korenizacija* implied the promotion of ethnic identities through symbolic signs including folklore and language (Habeck, 2019; Martin & Martin, 2001).

In the post-Soviet times, as the result of social and political processes, many groups have stamped their identities and realised the economic, political and social benefits associated with promoting their culture (Karaseva, 2012). Among many other groups, this has also been the case of the Izhma

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Komi (the self-denomination is the Izvatas; the Izvatas and the Izhma Komi are further used interchangeably). Despite the historical turbulences, they have maintained a strong and positive local identity which since the 1990s has steered them to seek recognition as Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian Federation (Shabaev et al., 2010). Reindeer herding, which was adopted from the Nenets and in the 19th century modernized, is often used by the Izvatas activists as evidence of the group's distinctiveness from the southern Komi people (Rohr, 2014). Yet, this is not the only determinant of Izvatas Indigenous descent. A unique dialect, inhabitation of ancestral lands, a nature-based lifestyle involving fishing, hunting and gathering, as well as a particular culture, have been developing Izvatas' identity for centuries.

At the same time, before the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet policy of russification had greatly influenced the cultural assimilation of non-Russian communities, weakening roles, status, and prestige of their languages, cultures, and identities (Stammler-Gossmann, 2009). The newly minted Indigenous activists had to entwine the culture of the ethnic groups with dominant Soviet culture in a form that could be presented to an outside observer (Kasten, 2005). Therefore, the cultural forms of expression have been developed under the umbrella of common Soviet values, and thus became more standardised and refined (Donahoe & Habeck, 2011). This has as well affected Lud, the reanimated traditional midsummer festival of Izhma Komi people. However, besides being a feast for the eyes of visitors and participants, Lud has become an event that has been stimulating to re-think and revitalise Izvatas distinct identity and unite all the Izvatas people who have been historically living all across the Russian North (Rocheva et al., 2019). At the same time, when in the early 2000s Izhma Komi were not granted the status of small numbered peoples, the Lud celebration started to play a greater role in addressing their claims to cultural and perhaps political self-determination.

In order to make this argument, we first place cultural heritage in the context of Russian domestic laws and policies. In the following sections, we provide the background of the Izvatas self-identification as a separate Indigenous group and discuss the meaning of the Lud celebration for constructing and revitalising Izhma Komi identity. In this context, we aim to explore the potential of listing the Lud festival as an intangible cultural heritage of the Komi Republic in becoming a backseat driver for the promotion of wider social agendas and possibly even political self-determination claims of the Izvatas. This article is based on a literature review as well as fieldwork research from both authors, conducted separately. In both cases, the field work took about two months, between spring and summer 2021 in the Izhemsky district of the Komi Republic, but also in Syktyvkar. The authors have been conducting semi-structured interviews combined with participant observation in Izhma, Sizyabsk, Bakur, Mokhcha, Gam, Mosh'Yuga and Vertep.

Cultural heritage and Indigenous self-determination in the Russian context

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007) is the first international legal instrument that recognises Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination (Cambou, 2019). Going beyond any claims for independence, UNDRIP contextualises the self-determination right of native populations as the freedom to determine their political status and freely pursue economic, social and cultural development (Lenzerini, 2019).

Even though UNDRIP underlines the rule of the territorial integrity of sovereign states, the Russian Government has not endorsed the Declaration (Rohr, 2014). In its justification, the Russian state referred to already existing domestic standards, which comply with the provisions

defined by the Declaration, and thus pointed out the redundancy to duplicate the principles (Lenzerini, 2019). The evidence has been pointed to in the Russian Constitution, as its preamble refers to the principles of equality and self-determination, as have been recognised in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966). Yet, the presence of those standards falls back on Lenin's policy of *korenizacija*. The idea behind this has been that in order to build up a multiethnic state, the ethnic groups which construct it need to be equipped with legal standards for their autonomies (Mälksoo, 2017). Hence, state continuity requires an efficient and attentive ethnonational policy that prevents and suppresses ethnic conflicts and protects ethnic and cultural diversities (Zaikov et al., 2017). Therefore, although the right to self-determination is multidimensional, historically in Russian settings the cultural self-determination of nations and ethnic minorities have been recognised (Donahoe, 2011).

In that regard, the Federal Law on Fundamental Legislation on Culture guarantees the right of ethnic communities to cultural and national autonomy (Russian Federation, 1992). This type of self-organization provides ethnic groups with the possibility to preserve and develop their ways of life, traditions, mother tongues, and self-awareness as distinct groups (Zaikov et al., 2017). To achieve these goals, the ethnic groups can benefit from the financial and legal support of the federation, put forward national and cultural interests to the legislative powers of local authorities, and preserve and enrich the historical and cultural heritage. Yet, national cultural autonomy is not a precondition *per se* for the enjoyment of the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples. Therefore, providing this kind of autonomy does not discharge the state from the positive obligation under international law to protect and promote Indigenous and minority rights by enhancing their participation in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, while referring to creation, interpretation, preservation and transmitting of tangible and spiritual heritage, the cultural-national autonomy framework provides the ethnic communities as heritage bearers with the capacity to freely realize their cultural self-determination (Bortolotto, 2015; Lixinski, 2015); the basis for this has been further developed in the domestic cultural heritage law framework.

Russian legislation has been operating with the term “memorials of the history and culture”, which corresponds to the concept of cultural heritage as referred to in international law (Petrov, 2010). When in 1988 Russia ratified the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, and the document became an integral part of the Russian legal system, the federal law in addition to the term “memorials of the history and culture” adopted a direct expression of “cultural heritage” (*kulturnoe nasledie*) acknowledging the influences of international law (Russian Federation, 2002). The federal law from 2002 established a framework to prevent the destruction and disappearance of items of cultural heritage, understood as separate buildings, monuments, works of painting, sculptures, arts and crafts, ensembles of monuments and archaeological sites (Russian Federation, 2002). The protection of tangible heritage takes place on the federal, regional and local (municipal) levels which require the subjects of the Federation to adopt relevant sectoral laws (Zadorin et al., 2017).

As for the recognition and protection of intangible heritage, Russia has not ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Thus, the main equivalent of the ICH Convention in the Russian legal system has been the federal law from 1992, which refers to spiritual heritage (Russian Federation, 1992). Yet in domestic legislation, intangible cultural values are considered as an integral part of the tangible heritage, and accordingly,

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constitute the subject of the general provisions enshrined in the constitution and legislation on the material cultural heritage. Therefore, the matters concerning identifying, recording, protecting, using and popularizing intangible heritage are solved by means of laws that complement each other, namely: first, the laws on culture; second, laws on the protection of tangible cultural heritage; and finally, policy documents such as the state national policy for the period up to 2025.

In these regulatory legal acts, intangible cultural heritage is understood both as customs, forms of representation and expression, knowledge and skills, as well as related tools, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces recognized by communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals as part of their cultural heritage. Such intangible cultural heritage, being in close relationship with the material and natural heritage, can be catalogued in the registry of the intangible cultural heritage of the peoples of the Russian Federation, which is a federally driven database system. In light of the lack of explicit federal laws on intangible heritage, the Komi Republic government adopted the resolution that lays the grounds for the creation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Registry, which is run by the Komi Center for Folk Arts and Advanced Training. The resolution does not provide a definition of intangible heritage, but an exemplary list, which is not definitive (Komi Republic, 2013a). What the document underlines is the meaning of the intangible heritage for creating and maintaining the identity as well as cultural continuity of all people living in the Komi, including their cultural diversity. Therefore, by recognising the constant creation of heritage, the resolution acknowledges that cultural practices constantly progress and develop, and thus cannot be “frozen” in time (Logan, 2012). This approach has been reflected in the heritage safeguarding strategy of the Center for Folk Arts, which besides being responsible for creating and updating the registry, organizes masterclasses and courses for adults and children, to facilitate the preservation of cultural elements in societies.

Interestingly, at the same time, the registry has not been created to safeguard the intangible heritage embedded in people, but to create a system that allows for further study, classification and access to information about heritage existing on the territory of the republic (Komi Republic, 2013a). Therefore the emphasis has been given to the visibility of the heritage, spread of information, and popularisation of cultural elements.

Moreover, the procedure for inscription is rather vague. It is not indicated who can submit the application for heritage listing nor what kind of experts are part of the interdepartmental group, which assesses the applications (Komi Republic, 2013b). This form of an open call for applications can provide a possibility for individuals as well as communities to propose elements of intangible heritage, that they themselves refer to as heritage to be included in the registry. The informants confirmed that there have been instances when individual community members have been proposing elements for inscription in the registry. However, the prevailing number of applications have been submitted by regional administrations and experts (folklorists and ethnographers), who have knowledge both about the practices but most importantly about the procedures (A.R., personal communication, 2021). Therefore, the participation of communities and thus their right to cultural self-determination is not excluded by the legislation of the Komi Republic. It still enables grass-root initiatives to challenge state and expert-driven politics (Bortolotto, 2010). Yet, the challenge is at the stage of assessing applications. The candidate for inscription needs to gain the favour of experts, the representatives of the Komi Ministry of Culture and representatives of the

Centre for Folk Arts, which at times is done on a discursive basis, followed by individual experts' preferences and wishes (A.R., personal communication, 2021).

Izvatas: background information



Figure 1: This map shows all the regions of the Russian Federation inhabited by Izhma Komi, created with mapchart.net

The formation of the ethnic group of the Izhma Komi occurred between the 16th and the 18th century when several groups of southern Komi migrated to the north of the present-day Komi Republic (Kim et al., 2015). Interethnic marriages between the Vym' Komi, the Udora Komi, the Russians and the Nenets were a determinant in the construction of the Izhma Komi group (Shabaev & Istomin, 2017). *Izhemskaya slobodka* (nowadays – Izhma village), founded in 1567 on the banks of the Izhma River, became the centre of the Izvatas residence.

The Komi residing in the southern parts of the contemporary Komi Republic led a sedentary lifestyle. Their ways of life consisted of hunting, gathering, cattle breeding, fishing and agriculture activities (Shabaev & Istomin, 2017). The newly established Izhma Komi group along with practising these traditional activities adopted reindeer husbandry from the neighbouring Nenets people, and thus became the only Komi group that was engaged in such occupation (Goloviznina, 2019).

While not being a predominantly nomadic population, the Izhma Komi designed a new way of herding, which significantly differed from reindeer husbandry techniques employed by other northern ethnic and Indigenous groups (Dwyer & Istomin, 2009). Based on the Izvatas's semi-nomadic lifestyle, the “brigade-shift” method of reindeer husbandry, accompanied by other advances and overall profit-oriented “large-scale” approaches to herding by the end of the 19th

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century established the Izvatas as the largest reindeer herders in Bolshezemelskaya tundra (Kim et al., 2015: 86–87).

In the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the shortages in accessible reindeer pastures, as well as the loss of reindeer due to infections and illnesses, urged the migration of the several Izvatas groups to Western Siberia and the Kola Peninsula (Istomin & Shabaev, 2016). In some cases, the Izvatas founded their own settlements; in others, they settled in the areas already inhabited by the Sami, the Nenets, the Khanty, and the Mansi people. Nowadays, the majority of the Izvatas still reside on the territory of their historical motherland, i.e. in the Izhemsky and other northern districts of the Komi Republic. Furthermore, the substantial Izvatas diasporas inhabit the Murmansk Oblast, the Nenets, the Yamalo-Nenets, and Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrugs (All-Russian Census, 2010).

According to the census in 2002, 16,000 Izhma Komi have resided in Russia. However, already in 2010, this figure decreased dramatically: less than 6000 people registered as Izvatas (Kim et al., 2015). Nonetheless, in some regions, statistical data may be misleading and distant from the real figures. Indication of own ethnic belonging as Komi, contrary to Izhma Komi or Izvatas, serves as the prevailing cause for that. In addition, at times, when interethnic marriages come at stake, the Izhma Komi prefer to register children as, for instance, Nenets, or Russians, to provide them with a clear ethnic and legal status (Farnosova, 2010; Liskevich, 2010).

Revitalisation of Izvatas identity

The Soviet-era experienced the drastic deconstruction of the Izhma Komi local ethnic identity and a rise in general Komi self-identification and self-awareness (Shabaev et al., 2010; Y.Y., personal communication, 2021). Indeed, it is particularly dramatic considering the Izhma Komi reluctance to accept the literary Komi language exemplary for the early years of the Soviet period (Kim et al., 2015).

At the same time, despite the noticeable weakening of local self-identification, the Izvatas succeeded in preserving their historical memory (Shabaev et al., 2010). In particular, it was achieved not only in the Komi Republic but in other regions of the Izhma Komi residence as well (Farnosova, 2010). Furthermore, the diasporic communities, particularly, from the geographically adjacent Nenets Autonomous Okrug, have managed to sustain their ties with the Izhemsky district, a historical motherland of the Izhma Komi people. Visiting relatives and taking care of the ancestors' graves are two of the most common rationales for undertaking a trip to the Komi Republic (Kaneva, 2015).

Despite variations in self-designation applied in the Izhma Komi diaspora communities, the distinctiveness of the Izhma Komi among other Komi groups is broadly supported by all communities. Particularly, such distinctiveness is highlighted in relation to reindeer husbandry and their dialect, which according to the Izhma Komi individuals from the Nenets Autonomous Okrug differs significantly from the literary Komi language, which is sometimes called “Ezhva” Komi (Terentyeva, 2015; Valei, 2015). Among other elements that determine “Izhma Kominess” the traditional women costumes, particular cuisine and knowledge of Komi and Izhma Komi songs and folklore are outlined as well (Kaneva, 2015).

The last decade of the 20th century commemorates the beginning of the ‘revitalisation’ of the Izhma Komi identity, triggered by the overall Indigenous political movement flourishing in the country

(Shabaev & Istomin, 2017; Y.Y., personal communication, 2021). It was the period characterized by the emergence of the concept of the ‘golden age of the Izvatas’, associated with the period of the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century when the Izhma Komi population was considerably distinctive from other Komi groups in terms of material prosperity and entrepreneurial skills (Shabaev et al., 2010). Consequently, culture was one of the spheres, where the revitalizing attempts were the most successful.

One of the celebrations promoting the traditional culture and traditional activities of the Izhma Komi people has been Hunter’s holiday (*Prazdnik okhotnika*). First organized in 2004 in commemoration of the district’s first hunting artel, in comparison with Lud celebration, it does not bear a particular historical counterpart and is not unique even to the Komi Republic (Komiinform, 2021). However, the distinctive Izhma Komi features are reflected in Hunter’s holiday as well. The Izhma Komi traditional folk and hunting costumes, worn by both participants and audience, are the most perceptible attributes (BNK, 2014). Furthermore, the celebration unites the residents of all villages of the Izhemsky district.

Another place where the exposition of the Izhma Komi self-awareness is especially vibrant is the Izhma’s District Museum of History and Local Lore, particularly its ethnographic exhibitions on traditional activities of the Izvatas (Izhma Museum, 2021). Museum collections reflecting the Izhma Komi culture and traditional occupations to various extents are likewise present in the regions of Izvatas diaspora.

One of the initiatives in the village of Muzhi, in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, has been the creation of the museum “Komi izba” that replicates a traditional Komi house from the end of the 19th century (Dom-muzej “Komi izba”, 2021). Moreover, the ethnographic exhibition of the Nenets Museum of Local Lore contains a small collection of Izvatas personal and household items (Nenets Museum, 2021). Furthermore, the Berezovo’s District Museum of Local Lore possesses a permanent exhibition on material and spiritual Izhma Komi culture and used to have a temporary exhibition on Zyryan reindeer herders (Berezovo Museum, 2021). The ethnonym ‘Zyryan’ should not be misleading: the local ethnic Izvatas historically employ the denomination ‘Komi’ in relation to the Komi living in the Komi Republic, while announcing themselves as ‘Zyryan’ (Kotov et al., 1996: 99). In addition to a variety of ethnographic exhibitions, all of the northern regions inhabited by the Izhma Komi have folk groups and cultural clubs, which organise masterclasses and workshops promoting the Izhma Komi culture.

Lud tradition as a booster of group identity

The most successful Izhma Komi cultural revival project was the reconstruction of the folk celebration Lud. Nowadays, the celebration is both central among the cultural activities in the Izhemsky district and eminent for all Izvatas inhabiting the Russian North.

Lud originates from old eponymous summer celebrations and symbolizes the spring to summer transition. The study conducted by Saveljeva has proven that some attributes of old lud celebrations have been adopted from the folk traditions of the neighbouring Russian speaking Ust-Tsilma people (Saveljeva, 2004). Just as reindeer husbandry initially adopted from the Nenets, so did the lud celebrations rooted in the northern Russian folk culture distinguished the Izhma Komi from other Komi groups.

In the 19th century, contrary to the modern Lud, which is organized once per year, lud celebrations took place on each Sunday and holidays between Pentecost and St. Elijah's Day (Savel'eva, 2004). Similarly, contrary to the contemporary centralized location of Lud in the village of Izhma, in pre-Soviet times each Izhma Komi village held its own celebrations, which commonly took place on meadows on the rivers' banks. A place of the celebrations has been reflected in the name of the holiday as well: *lud* means "meadow" in the Komi language. The indispensable elements of old lud celebrations are emblematic of modern Lud as well: horse races, various folk games and dances, including a chain dance.

The central day of the old lud celebrations was the last day before the beginning of the Apostles' Fast, which marked the beginning of the haymaking period. The day was finished with the ritual dance procession that was named *vorota* (translated as "gates"), which is reconstructed in modern Lud and is considered to be one of the most picturesque parts of the celebration. According to Saveljeva (2004: 203), the dance followed and symbolized the celebration's fundamental idea of transition.

The Lud tradition was suspended during the Soviet period, but it was revived in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The celebration's restoration occurred during the time of the overall Izhma Komi ethnic identity stand out and aimed at the preservation and exposition of the group's distinctness (Rocheva et al., 2019). The first attempt to organize a folklore celebration in the Izhemsky district was undertaken in June 1984, when the interdistrict festival of folk groups took place in Izhma, attracting the artists from the Izhemsky, Pechorsky and Intinsky districts. However, only in 1991, the celebration restored its historical name and thenceforth became an annual event.

Contemporary Lud restored the vital, most visually attractive parts of old lud celebrations, including *vorota* dance-procession, horse races, traditional games and narrative dances. Although the celebration is now consolidated in the village of Izhma, other villages of the Izhemsky district arrange their own courtyards (called *sikt*, a village), which represent their typical features, traditional goods, food, and souvenirs. The distinctive visual outlook of the celebration is further strengthened by participants, particularly women, wearing traditional Izhma Komi costumes, either inherited from their ancestors or sewn specifically for the celebration (Ministry of Cultural and National Policy of the Komi Republic, 2007; Rocheva et al., 2019; Savel'eva, 2004).

Together with the revitalisation of old traditions, the festival has acquired new attributes typical to most folklore celebrations in Russia – performances of various folklore groups from the district and beyond, accompanied by the sale of traditional souvenirs and local goods. Overall, a clear divide in the structure of the celebration is evident. The morning and early afternoon parts are a classical representation of Russia's modern folklore festivals not bearing any particular ethnic meaning. In contrast, the evening and night parts commencing with the *vorota* processions and culminating on the small "island" surrounded by the Izhma and Kurya rivers, even nowadays are highly ritualized and endowed with symbolism and pre-Christian beliefs.

Present-day Lud bears several symbolic meanings. The paramount idea of transition, though conceivably not as significant to the modern-day Izvatas as it used to be to their ancestors, still flourishes in celebration's rituals. Among other symbolic features, openness and unity are of essential importance. Lud does not only unify residents of the Izhemsky district, it rather serves as a binding thread for all Izvatas: those living in the Komi Republic and representatives of diaspora groups from the Kola Peninsula, the Nenets, the Yamalo-Nenets, and the Khanty-Mansi

Autonomous Okrugs. The unification of all Izhma Komi is stated as one of the official goals of the celebration as well (The Statute concerning the 15th interregional traditional folk celebration “Lud”, 2021). For some people from the diasporas, participation in Lud is concurrently the first visit to the historical motherland of the Izhma Komi people (Chuprova, 2015; E.E.S, personal communication, 2021; V.K.K., personal communication, 2021). Participation in Lud with the intention to find relatives is notably common for the diasporas as well (Khozyainov, 2015). Additionally, the contemporary ritual of taking a seedling from Izhma to plant it back at home emerged with the inclusion of diasporas in the celebration. This ritual is associated with the connecting and uniting nature of Lud as well (Ministry of Cultural and National Policy of the Komi Republic, 2007).

Izvatas cultural heritage and community recognition

When the Izvatas association started to articulate their ethnic distinctiveness at the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a need to select signals for creating a unified Izvatas identity across the group divide. Therefore, on the one hand, what Barth calls the “codification of idioms” meant the creation of new cultural forms of expression which reflect the native ethnic identity (Barth, 1969: 34). On the other hand, in that case, relevance has been given to the revival of the selected cultural traits to establish the historical tradition justifying the distinct Indigenous descent (Barth, 1969). Even though the ethnocultural self-determination of Izvatas was accompanied by the creation of the museums, libraries, folk groups, cultural organisations and handicraft factory (Vokueva et al., 2015), the actual symbol of Izvatas ethnic and cultural distinctiveness became the revived Lud celebration, which over time has been used as a catalyst to build Izvatas separate Indigenous identity (Rocheva et al., 2019). When in 2009 the Lud tradition became one of the wonders of the Komi Republic and in 2013 was included in the regional register of the intangible cultural heritage of the Komi, its importance has been elevated from the celebration of local meaning to the republican one. This has resulted in several consequences for the tradition itself, as well as for the position of Izhma Komi in the republic. Together with the inscription in the registry, almost instantly the visibility of the celebration has expanded beyond the regions inhabited by Izvatas (V.Sh., personal communication, 2021). As one of the informants stated: “You see, people read about Lud, they become interested in the culture of Izvatas as well as their problems. Look at yourself, you read about the tradition, now you are here in Izhma and will write the first publication in English about the celebration. Is it not a lot?” (V.Sh., personal communication, 2021). Additionally, the statistics conducted after the festival in 2018 has shown the growing number of participants from all across Russia, as well as foreign visitors, mainly other Finno-Ugric people from Finland, Estonia and Hungary (Argumenty i fakty, 2020). In that regard, the forecast of increased revenue, which the tourism industry interested in exploring Izvatas culture could generate, ultimately became an important asset of the inscription. A wider interest in the celebration has been followed by a number of publications; books and newspaper articles replenished the collections of local libraries and museums (Personal observation of the author, 2021).

As a practice that earned recognition as intangible cultural heritage, the Lud celebration could benefit from the wider financial support coming additionally from the budget of the Komi Republic as well as became eligible to apply for funding from other sources (Komi Republic Government, 2019). Moreover, the biggest oil company operating in the region, Lukoil-Komi, became one of the main sponsors of the event, as a part of their strategy to support cultural

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development in the extraction areas (Lukoil, n.d.). The involvement of significant resources for the administration of the festival determined the presence of the district and regional officials during the event, along with the representatives of Lukoil (V.Sh., personal communication, 2021). Under those conditions, Lud became a platform to accommodate conferences and think tank forums (the so-called Izhma readings), which welcome scholars, cultural workers and activists in contributing to the public debate by discussing the most topical issues surrounding Izhma Komi (Admizhma, 2020). Lud has exceeded the frames of being a mere local feast but gave space for researchers, journalists, representatives of public organizations and politicians to meet, thus gaining a political undertone (A.T., personal communication, 2021). It allowed raising the topics, which otherwise could have been too thorny to be discussed, under the umbrella of cultural heritage. To such a degree, it offered a space to articulate and negotiate the questions of self-determination, Indigenous status, and land rights.

Moreover, the heritage of the Lud festival became the manifestation of the Izvatas distinct identity. The need to learn dances, songs and traditional expressions to hold the festival has been exceptionally important for the community members (V.K.K., personal communication, 2021). Consequently, Lud has been growing into a tool to strengthen Izvatas position in the politics of the Komi Republic, as people determined to preserve and transmit to the next generations distinct culture, language and identity. But most importantly the growing importance of Lud has been facilitating the recognition of the Izvatas community as such, as being distinct from other Komi people.

Lud Heritage Listing and advocacy for further political rights

Previous studies conducted by others, such as Barth (1969) have shown that ethnic groups often use their cultural distinctiveness to reach further political goals, and thus ethno-political movements strive to reinforce the development of cultural forms of expression. Inevitably, the formal acknowledgement of the meaning of practices for communities can be achieved in a form of lists of cultural heritage (Blake, 2015; Bortolotto, 2017).

However, the Russian legislation has a rather peculiar attitude towards lists of a different kind. Since the system often falls short in providing a convincing definition of its objects, therefore, it adheres to the principle to define “lists”. For instance, the definition of the “Arctic zone of the Russian Federation”, which lacks a convincing description, at the end merely enumerates territories defined as the “Russian Arctic”. The same is true for the “territories of traditional nature use”, “Indigenous small numbered peoples” and at the end also “intangible cultural heritage”.

The system of “lists”, thus, follows in the arbitrary logic of the Russian bureaucratic decision-making system, which being drawn on the policy *divide et impera*, reflects the important political maxims of the authoritarian regime. This is what Cowan et al. (2001) have called the ‘essentializing proclivities of law’, understood as a tendency of the legal systems to operate within clear-cut categories of classification (Cowan et al., 2001: 10). Thus, the legal systems tend to contour the boundaries, whether it is “heritage – not heritage” or “Indigenous small numbered – non-Indigenous”, to include or exclude and grant rights and protection or deny them (Singh, 2014).

In the light of the non-recognition of Izvatas rights, and community aspiration in earning the small-numbered peoples status, the process of heritage listing can open up a backdoor not only for wider cultural heritage protection but especially for political claims. The recognition of the intangible

heritage of the group, which has not been perceived by law as separate, can go beyond the enhancement of the visibility of heritage or stimulating identity. It can provide the Izvatas with a strong argument in favour of greater self-governance and possibly with the recognition as an Indigenous small numbered people of the Russian Federation. Therefore, the listing of the Lud festival fosters peoples' agency, as they become more prone to further actions, furthers their cultural and political self-determination.

Since cultural heritage law, both international and domestic, is often perceived to be a rather apolitical domain of heritage experts, it rarely attracts the attention of elites. However, under the cover of preservation of the past, imperceptibly it becomes an important theatre for the articulation of broader political claims (Lixinski, 2015). This is shown in the case of the Lud festival, of which listing was simply meant to fill in the regional registry and also to promote the celebration (conversation with Tatyana Popova, 2021), without presupposing that the festival can evolve into a platform for broader claims. Therefore, the political demands are slowly rising out of the primarily apolitical act of heritage recognition.

Claiming political self-determination and connecting it with the small numbered peoples status by the use of heritage listings seems to be a less rebellious way to secure Izvatas rights. On the one hand, using the heritage listings does not involve land rights claims, as is the case while bringing environmental protection and ecological issues as the first and main reasons for community recognition. This is what the Izvatas organisation in the early 2000s has built upon: the unsuccessful request for the small-numbered peoples status. On the other hand, much of the expectations for greater autonomy can be too far fetched, given that the legal mechanisms for heritage protection privilege state rights and obligations to preserve the heritage and its meaning over communities' rights to heritage (Bortolotto, 2015; Xanthaki, 2017).

Conclusions

Even though the Izvatas, both the community and the public movement, have been particularly active in articulating their cultural and political claims, domestically as well as internationally, their position in the Russian legal system is not properly recognised. Nevertheless, the inevitable success has been the enhanced visibility and the wider recognition of Izhma Komi through the process of listing the Lud festival as an intangible cultural heritage of the community. The meaning of the revitalised festival for boosting the Izvatas identity cannot be disregarded either.

However, at the current stage, even a thinner version of self-determination does not seem to be on the horizon. Even though the Izhma Komi identity and its strong expression during the Lud have the potential to become a forum for more political claims, the manifestation of those demands is not yet fully developed. It is doubtful whether the Lud celebration can become an incentive for political self-determination, since the meanings of heritage, as well as possibilities that heritage recognition may offer, are tightly controlled by the state, thus reducing to a minimum the potential of heritage in the exercise of self-determination.

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