National Identity, Mentality and Character

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Abstract

Article is devoted to the research of a genetic connection of national identity, mentality and national character in a situation of ethnic and inter-civilization contradictions in the modern society. Consideration of these three as unities of the "national" concept forming results in the need of taking into account sociocultural context that determines a specific methodological position of the authors. The position of the researchers actualizes cognitive and axiological phenomena, in particular, a discourse and a narrative. Both national identity, and national mentality are the basis, and effective instruments of ethno-mobilization processes, preservation and cultural development, eventually, – viability of the nation. But it is national culture within which such phenomena as values and symbols are generated and function; the last, eventually, are formed by a discourse and a narrative in the ways of value production, creation of meaning. They are the important regulatory principles, forming peculiar ethnic markers defining borders of national communities. For both national mentality, and national identity an appeal to history of the people is characteristic, and the history is always connected with social memory of the nation. Often memory constructs the past, interpreting past events in a way that the symbolical values which are reproduced in this process could "work" in the best degree to provide the present of the nation with the resources that are necessary for it to maintain steady national identity. Thus, national identity can be created anew depending on specific needs of historical community.

Keywords: national mentality, national identity, historical memory, multicultural world.
Introduction

The appeal to the problem of interrelation of national mentality and national identity is not casual. Despite the seeming development of these problems taken "separately" (in particular it concerns the problem of national identity), the processes happening in the modern world force to realize the need of closer attention to these phenomena. Distressing realities of our days, the amplifying ethnic and inter-civilization contradictions define a requirement of social and philosophical comprehension of these phenomena, a reveal of their interrelation and possible contradictions between them. The inter-definition of theoretical and practical aspects of the solution, in particular, in the process of political decision making that is watched by the modern world anxiously is evident.

Modern realities call into question the optimism of many globalization theorists who (often in an implicit form) represent globalization as an inevitable distribution in the world of modern western civilization values and cultures. And though this process, certainly, takes place, multi-directional and contradictory tendencies work in its framework. In the middle of the XX century appears a phenomenon which received the name "ethnic paradox" which represents reaction to globalization process and finds its expression as a tendency to national consciousness growth, protection of national culture. It is no coincidence that we more often speak about "the reverse globalization" when the huge mass of people from Africa, Asia move to the developed western countries that often sharpens the multicultural conflicts. Thus, global integration develops along with social and cultural disintegration [1].

Many researchers emphasize that national identity in many respects is defined by the cultural conflicts therefore research of interdependence and correlation of national culture, identity and mentality can be demanded for comprehension of the modern international conflicts.

It is thought that underestimation of such phenomenon as national mentality, in many respects defines reduction of national culture, ignoring its specific features. At the same time consideration of both national identity, and national mentality beyond national culture conducts to their separation from social and cultural context, thereby making impossible the identification of their structural interrelations.

Methods

Considering culture and identity interrelation through a prism of national has its specific features defined by the researcher's position as well. It actualizes such cognitive and axiological phenomena as discourse and narrative in the analysis of the national and ethnic phenomena. Thus, S. Benkhbib, reflecting on interrelation of national culture and identity, emphasizes the defining role of narrative in constructing of the last: "Cultures do not act as integrity with accurately designated borders; they represent semantic networks, again and again redefined by means of words... Cultures are constituted through narrative … Cultural narratives also establish borders: they separate "us" from "them", "us" from "others" …. Cultural narratives establish a framework, … cause and structure of individual narrative. Actions of people … demand identification through interpretation and narrative" [2]. National culture creates a field within which identity and mentality are formed. And though two last concepts are not identical, both of them can be considered as structural elements of a wider phenomenon – culture.
Results and Discussion

In spite of the fact that problems of national identity, national mentality and national character are widely discussed in modern scientific and publicistic literature, many questions remain open. First of all, it concerns the definition of the concepts of mentality, mindset, national character. Researchers note their very indistinct, unclear nature, there is still no generally accepted definition. So, some authors "separate" the concepts "mentality" and "mindset", some consider them as synonymic, along with such concepts as "national character", "mental make-up of the nation", etc. In the offered article the concept "mentality" and "mindset" are treated as synonymous. Mentality includes collective values, behavior models and is connected first of all with everyday life of a person, with mass, daily consciousness; collective character, integrity of conscious and unconscious, stability, conservatism can be considered as fundamental characteristics of mentality (including national one [3]).

Even more uncertain is the situation with the problem of national character. The comprehension of this phenomenon has taken place for centuries (at first within history of philosophy in Vigo, Herder, Hegel's works, and then in ethnology, cultural anthropology, psychology, etc.), but still there is no unity of opinions among researchers not only on the nature of this phenomenon, but also on the fact of its existence. So, some researchers consider it can not be proved scientifically that any nation has national character [4]. The doubts in heuristic value of this concept are also expressed. As I.S. Kohn notes, the term "national character" is not an analytical, but a descriptive one [5] Swedish ethnologist O. Löfgren also considers that concepts national character and mentality “can hardly be used as strict terms but rather as focusing concepts; they direct our attention towards those aspects of culture, identity and mentality which are difficult to verbalize" [6].

In general it is possible to note that in the process of comprehension of the concepts "mentality", "national character" researchers do not draw a clear boundary between them, often using them as identical. So, an outstanding Russian philosopher G. Shpet, considering the concept "national spirit" writes: "we recognize it in an image which symbolizes meaning and idea of the people …" [7, page 93] and concludes: "The spirit in this sense is a connection of characteristic features of the people behavior; it makes its character in wholeness with constancy of disposition" [7, page 110].

We consider the position of P. I. Smirnov who, considering national identity, treats it as dialectic unity of two components – objective (obvious) which consists of the group norms evolving from group requirements and values, and subjective (latent) to be productive. He designates the objective component as a national character, and subjective one as a national mentality which includes outlook, mindset and attitude [8].

National mentality, being a basic component of identity, makes essential impact on its formation, but the changes in national identity result in mentality changes. Being social and cultural phenomena, they are transformed with the change of social, economic and cultural realities, but, in our opinion, national mentality, representing deeper layers of spiritual life of people, changes much more slowly and acts as a conservative component of identity. But in the periods of social crises sharp changes take place in mentality of ethnos; its valuable systems, views and representations are radically transformed. G. Shpet, noting that "spiritual lifestyle pattern of the people is a variable value", wrote: "spiritual life of mankind is a terrible phantasmagoria, a nightmare, but not systematic evolution of the seed transferred and
perceived under laws of the nature and in the terms appointed by it" [9, page 153]. It fully refers to mentality of the Russian people. So, for example, after the revolution of 1917 as a result of active anti-religious promotion, repressions directed against church in two-three decades religious values sharply fell in society, the generation of atheists was brought up. During the post-Perestroika period with the destruction of the Soviet value system the country appeared in a situation of value vacuum. The question of creation of a new system of values for the purpose of preservation of the nation unity sharpened. The ruling elite considered religion as the most important component of this system, and today we observe "the religious Renaissance" when religious values and norms are widely spread and are more and more accepted in public mass consciousness, sincerely or in favor of fashion.

National mentality, not being congenital feature of ethnos and being social-and-cultural caused, is not homogeneous. It is a complicated phenomenon, dialectic unity of mentalities of various social groups of this ethnos which have the specifics, and can even differ considerably. At the same time national mentality, being complicated cultural and psychological system of ethnos, comprises the basic features inherent to all its social groups and individuals which are historically determined by genotype, traditions, common language which, according to researchers, is the major component and determinant of national mentality.

As it was already noted, the national mentality represents an integrity of conscious and unconscious, it is spread in an everyday consciousness and a process of its formation is a substantially spontaneous one. The rational component is a dominating one in national identity, but political and ideological mechanisms are significant in its formation. As S. Huntington notes, "like other identities, national identity is one which is constructed (thus, it is subjected to deconstruction)" [10, c.173]. Legitimacy of this thesis is confirmed also by the history of our country. Throughout centuries the Russian people identified themselves as citizens of the Russian Empire, with formation of the Soviet Union – mostly as Soviet people, representatives of various nations inhabiting the country. After disintegration of the Soviet Union the former Soviet people identify themselves as the Russians, Ukrainians, etc. Though it should be noted that this mostly concerns the representatives of the younger generation formed already in conditions of the sovereign states on the post-Soviet space, their ruling elite made very serious efforts to form new national identity. As for the senior generation who was born and grew up in the USSR, the considerable part of it preserves mentality formed in sociocultural conditions of the Soviet society and it significantly complicates the process of their national identification. In our opinion, the essence of this phenomenon is explained by the thesis of Huntington that the feeling of national identity and the essence of it are not identical. If the first one is mainly formed under the influence of external conditions and therefore a shorter historical period is necessary for its formation, the second one is formed much more slowly, consisting "of the numerous, often clashing social, economic and political trends" [11, c.53].

Both national identity and national mentality are the basis and effective instruments of ethnomobilization processes, preservation and cultural development, eventually, – viability of the nation. But it is national culture within which such phenomena as values and symbols are generated and function; the last, eventually, are formed by a discourse and a narrative in the ways of value production, creation of meaning. They are important regulatory principles, forming the peculiar ethnic markers defining borders of national communities.
In modern conditions of the going deep fragmentation of the world, total instability of all social structures and institutes questions of national roots, restoration and preservation of historical memory are of particular importance. Attempts to solve these questions are in many respects urged to become means of overcoming this uncertainty, creating stable models able to execute a role of the peculiar "triggers" stimulating the national and cultural movements.

R. de Celia, M. Reysigl and R. Vodak, addressing the problem of a discourse construction of national identity, address one of key concepts of P. Bourdieu philosophy – the concept "habitus". National identity, from their point of view, can be considered as "a kind of a habitus, in other words as a complex of the general ideas, schemes of conceptualization and perception, the corresponding emotional presumptions divided inter-subjectively in frames of certain individual groups, as well as behavioural features which are in total acquired through "national" socialization" [12, page 153]. There is a question: what are these "general ideas, schemes of conceptualization and perception, the corresponding emotional installations", etc.? We suppose that the role of national mentality is stressed here. Of course, the last cannot be considered as the only determinants of national identity, however its value cannot be diminished.

Summary

The German researcher R. Shprandel notes: "Usually all collective representations refer to mentality, but in this variety it is necessary to allocate "centers of gravity". The major sphere constituting mentality are ideas of person, firstly, and ideas of his own group, secondly. As ideas of a person are extremely changeable, it can seem that there are no spiritual, anthropological constants at all. However one such constant exists - it is the need of the person to find the answer to the question of his mission. The most important function of a group consists is to help a person to find the answer to this question. So two aforesaid areas of representations are closely connected" [13, page 82-83]. Really, the main questions of identity are the questions "Who Am I?", "What Is My Mission?", "Who am I among other people?", "Who are “we" and who are the "others"?

Conclusion

Thus, the main, frame-forming questions of mentality and identity are in many respects identical; at the same time mentality due to its mostly symbolical and axiological nature is capable to provide answers to these existential questions. Both national mentality and national identity, when answering these questions appeal to the history of the nation, and this history is always connected with social memory of the nation. Often memory constructs its past, interpreting past events making the symbolical values which are reproduced in this process to "work" to provide the present of the nation with the resources which are necessary to maintain stable national identity. Thus, national identity can be created again and again depending on specific needs of historical community.

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