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## Openness and Closedness: Ethnic Strategies of Indigenous Minorities in Virtuality vs. Reality

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the dynamics of openness and closedness in both real and virtual environments, focusing on how communities navigate these positions in relation to their physical and online interactions. It considers whether openness or closedness reflects a deliberate strategy adopted by ethnic groups, and whether virtual spaces function primarily as a means of asserting visibility to others or as an internal resource for sustaining ethnic identity. The study centers on four small-numbered Indigenous communities in Russia, drawing on a consolidated database of their social media activity from popular social networks VK, Odnoklassniki, and Telegram. The analysis reveals a strong interconnection between physical and digital spaces, highlighting how both environments shape the ways these communities express themselves culturally and socially. For instance, Besermians adopt an open positioning to gain recognition and visibility, whereas Tubalars limit communication to within their community due to uncertain external conditions. The Soyots illustrate how geographic remoteness contributes to digital closedness, while the Nagaybaks highlight the flexibility of these strategies: under challenging circumstances, the community exhibits increased network activity and openness, which decreases during periods of relative ethnic stability. These cases collectively reveal the adaptability and mobility of contemporary Indigenous cultures. They show how virtual environments are not merely reflective of real-life processes but actively influence cultural interactions, social strategies, and the negotiation of group identity. Overall, this study

demonstrates the intricate and evolving relationship between digital and physical spaces in shaping today's indigenous communities.

### KEYWORDS

openness, closedness, virtuality, ethnicity, identity, Indigenous peoples, Besermians, Tubalars, Nagaybaks, Soyots

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## Introduction

Digital virtuality has attracted scholarly interest since the 1980s, emerging as a distinct phenomenon that challenges traditional notions of reality. Early studies debated whether the digital world was useful or even meaningful for real-world development. Over time, the focus shifted toward methodologies for studying online spaces, conducting cyberfield experiments, and exploring the thematic potential of the Internet. Until recently, research framed online activity through clear dichotomies: reality vs. virtuality, online vs. offline, physical vs. digital interaction. Today, however, the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds have become blurred, making them far less distinct than they were 20–30 years ago. The extent of virtual activity now depends on a group's internal needs and its external relevance and recognition by other communities. Cyberactivism increasingly serves as a tool for self-presentation and self-actualization, rather than an end in itself.

This article explores how openness and closedness shape identities in both real and virtual worlds, a topic rooted in long-standing philosophical, social, and cultural debates. In my research on Indigenous minorities, I have repeatedly observed strikingly diverse positioning strategies: some groups embrace active, open approaches, while others prefer passive, closed ones. The rise of virtual environments adds new dimensions and meanings to these strategies (Belorussova & Khokholkova, 2023).

Virtuality takes center stage in this study for a reason: online representation provides the lens through which ethnic community models are analyzed here. While working on the Russian Science Foundation (RSF) project *Small-Numbered Indigenous Peoples: Virtual Ethnicity and Online Experiences*, our research group found that online spaces often make the boundaries between openness and closedness more visible. These boundaries shape how communities present themselves, communicate, and decide which information to share or withhold.

This article examines how patterns of openness and closedness in a community are shaped by its interactions in both real and virtual environments. Do these patterns reflect a conscious choice by ethnic groups, or are they shaped by

external circumstances? How does virtuality function today: as a tool for positioning communities in relation to others, or as an internal resource for sustaining ethnic identity? Understanding why people turn or do not turn to the Internet for managing tasks related to ethnic identity lies at the heart of this research.

The research focuses on four small-numbered Indigenous peoples in Russia, namely, the Besermians, Nagaybaks, Soyots, and Tubalars, each with populations under 10,000. These communities provide a particularly clear lens for studying openness and closedness, given their density, stability, and relative homogeneity. Each section of the article examines the strategies these groups adopt, comparing physical-world interactions with digital engagement. From my perspective, the Soyots and Tubalars exemplify closed models, though for different reasons: the Soyots' closure is shaped mainly by objective factors such as geographical remoteness, while the Tubalars' closure stems more from subjective efforts to shield their community from outside influence. The Besermians display an open model, and the Nagaybaks represent a transitional case, having shown both open and closed positioning at different points in history. Across all groups, strategies are fluid rather than fixed, often combining elements of openness and closedness.

This research draws on both long-term fieldwork and digital observation. Over the past decade, I have conducted extensive studies in the territories of Russia's Indigenous peoples. More recently, I have tracked the digitization of ethnic culture, observing groups, personal accounts, posts, comments, and chats across platforms including VK<sup>1</sup>, Facebook<sup>2</sup>, Instagram<sup>3</sup>, Telegram<sup>4</sup>, WhatsApp<sup>5</sup>, Viber<sup>6</sup>, Odnoklassniki<sup>7</sup>, YouTube<sup>8</sup>, and TikTok<sup>9</sup>, while routinely conducting subject-matter interviews and surveys. This article relies on a consolidated database of small-numbered Indigenous communities on VK, Odnoklassniki, and Telegram, enabling a nuanced analysis of how these communities navigate openness and closedness across physical and virtual spaces.

This research article is organized into five sections: Openness and Closedness: Trends Over Time; Strategies of Openness: The Besermyan Experience; Strategy of

<sup>1</sup> VK (short for its original name VKontakte) is a Russian online social media and social networking service. <https://vk.com> VK™ is a trademark of VK.com Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Facebook в России признана экстремистской организацией и заблокирована.

<sup>3</sup> Instagram™ is a trademark of Instagram Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Instagram полностью заблокирована в России как экстремистская организация.

<sup>4</sup> Telegram™ is a trademark of Telegram Group Inc., its operational center is based in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>5</sup> WhatsApp is a trademark of WhatsApp Inc., registered in the US and other countries.

<sup>6</sup> Viber is a trademark of Viber Media S.à r.l., registered and located in Luxembourg.

<sup>7</sup> Odnoklassniki is a Russian social network owned by VK. <https://ok.ru>

<sup>8</sup> YouTube™ is a trademark of Google Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

<sup>9</sup> TikTok is a trademark of ByteDance, registered in China and other countries. TikTok has suspended all new posting and live-streaming for users in the Russian Federation.

Closedness: The Tubalar Experience; Strategy of Closedness: The Soyot Experience; and Transitional Model: The Nagaybak Experience. I extend my gratitude to the RSF project team for their support in data collection, and to all research participants for their contributions.

### Openness and Closedness: Trends Over Time

The concept of open and closed societies was first proposed in the 1940s by Karl R. Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945/2013). Popper cites the events of World War II as the impetus for writing the book. Although it was published only in 1945, after the war in Europe had ended, he believed his work contributed to the Allied victory. Popper saw his book as a direct opposition to Nazism and Communism, challenging Hitler and Stalin, who had briefly become allies through the 1939 non-aggression pact (Popper, 1945/2013).

Popper viewed democracy as the only form of governance that allows change without violence, referring to such societies as open. In contrast, totalitarian systems such as Nazism and communism suppress individuality while characterized by stagnation; he considered these as closed. These societies feature static social structures, limited mobility, resistance to innovation, traditionalism, and dogmatic authoritarianism. Open societies, by contrast, allow individuals to make decisions freely, respect personal freedom, and accommodate diverse trends, movements, and cultures (Popper, 1945/2013).

While groundbreaking in its post-war context, Popper's framework is highly politicized and one-sided, largely framing openness as positive and closedness as harmful. Over half a century later, George Soros<sup>10</sup> refined the concept, defining open communities as with a dynamic social structure, high mobility, capacity for innovation, criticality, individualism, and democratic pluralistic ideology. He also emphasizes that the absence of rigid guidelines, values, and goals [is] an integral attribute of freedom (Soros<sup>10</sup>, 1997).

The concept of closedness was later refined to include Eastern and small-numbered types. Jullien (1999) described the Eastern type as closed, impenetrable, hierarchically organized social structures that prioritize the group's interests over those of the individual. Oleinik (2001), studying prison inmate groups, popularized the notion of small-numbered groups, characterizing them as closed communities showing "the lack of connection between people's everyday life and their formal power as well as how underdeveloped the political representation of ordinary people's interests is" (Oleinik, 2001, p. 16; Trans. by Svetlana Belorussova—S. B.). These communities are defined by personal insufficiency, the inability of individuals to exercise agency, and a rigid hierarchical organization marked by stark contradictions between elites and the general populace (Radina, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Open Society Foundation founded by George Soros is recognized as an organization whose activities are undesirable in the Russian Federation. Фонд Открытое общество, основанный Джорджем Соросом, является организацией, деятельность которой признана нежелательной на территории Российской Федерации. <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7756>

Later, four additional forms of closed groups were identified: forced isolation, marked by detachment from society regardless of desire (e.g., an expedition lost in the taiga); coerced isolation, imposed against one's will by social rules (e.g., convicts or military conscripts); voluntary isolation, exemplified by monks or hermits; and voluntary-compulsory isolation, observed in closed professional groups or specialized educational institutions (Kondrat'ev, 1997). Overall, these approaches offer a more pluralistic view of closed groups, considering whether isolation is voluntary or imposed.

More recently, researchers have come to define closedness as elitist isolation. Tombiyants notes, "The upper strata of any social system, to a greater or lesser extent, always strive for closedness, for a certain conservation of social relations, although at the same time they may facilitate and support additional mobility channels" (Tombiyants, 2013, p. 40; Trans. by S. B.). Johnston et al. (2017) suggest that each person can access and display both open and closed models, though most tend toward one (p. 18). Each pole carries its own set of advantages and disadvantages (p. 31). Consequently, closedness has increasingly been approached not only as a forced or coerced condition but also as a voluntary choice.

In the digital realm, the Internet has given people who feel restricted or dissatisfied with face-to-face social interaction a chance to connect and explore themselves. Those living in real-world closed communities, where social interaction is tightly controlled or limited, can find new opportunities online. According to Miller et al. (2016), there is a strong stereotype that social networks are "fake" and a substitute for reality. However, a study from industrial China shows that the virtual world is often perceived as more honest and open. Online friendships, labeled with the word *chun* ("purer"), are valued for lacking pragmatic motives that often shape offline relationships. As one resident explains,

They [online friends] like you and talk to you because they really like you for who you are, not because you are rich so they can borrow money from you, or you are powerful so they can get a job from you. Things are much cleaner here [on the internet] without any involvement of power and money. (Miller et al., 2016, p. 108)

Over the years, online interactions have grown so significant that they can outweigh real-world behaviors: in Chile, a romantic relationship gains social weight only after appearing on Facebook<sup>11</sup>, and in industrial China, a declaration of love online is often considered more truthful than one made in person (Miller et al., 2016, p. 109).

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, open and closed models began to appear in digital communities. Popravko (2009) studied online communities of music lovers with a limited number of users on social media, examining both internal and external reasons for their closedness. Externally, the communities faced legal constraints due to the illegal exchange of audio-visual materials, which the law classifies as copyright violations. Internally, there was a desire to create a community of interested, motivated users capable of actively participating in the collection and exchange of material within

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<sup>11</sup> Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Facebook в России признана экстремистской организацией и заблокирована.

the community. Popravko (2009) argues that this is how the community protects itself from unmotivated users, as well as superficial, often negative communication that takes place on publicly available resources.

Sometimes we encounter reverse examples of closedness, where it is used not to restrict users but to expand the audience. For instance, the social media platform Clubhouse<sup>12</sup> initially attracted participants by creating a sense of exclusivity: registration was available by invitation only, and selectivity was reinforced by celebrity users such as Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Kevin Hart, and Oleg Tinkov<sup>13</sup> (Belorussova, 2021, p. 133)

Through their study of corporate enterprise networks (EMS), van Osch and Bulgurcu (2020) introduced the concepts of bonding and bridging. Bonding refers to closed groups and denotes connection and involvement within a limited set of people, allowing for deep immersion. Bridging, in contrast, characterizes open communities and involves wide interaction and broader reach. The researchers formulated several hypotheses regarding bonding and bridging. For example, “in open groups, the stronger the interconnections within an ESM-based group are, the more ideas are being generated” reflects bridging (van Osch & Bulgurcu, 2020, p. 921), while “in closed groups, the closer the interconnections in an ESM-based group are, the more ideas are being generated within the group” reflects bonding. These findings highlight the strengths of both open and closed models, enabling the authors to present them as complementary rather than contradictory (van Osch & Bulgurcu, 2020, p. 912).

This dynamic is also evident in the evolution of social media platforms such as VK or VKontakte, a popular Russian social media platform. As VK grew, online communities became one of its most popular features. Initially, most groups were open, but over time some communities chose to close their groups to maintain a narrower circle of contacts. These included groups of classmates, fellow villagers, and users with shared interests. Today, the group feature is less actively used; however, communication in group chats often follows a similar logic.

Over the past eighty years, the concepts of open and closed communities have undergone numerous refinements and adaptations. One key factor driving these changes is the digital environment, which offers a wide range of tools for selecting one model over another. In the following sections, I intend to examine openness and closedness empirically by exploring examples of specific indigenous communities in the context of virtual ethnicity.

## The Strategy of Openness: The Besermyan Experience

The Besermyans are densely settled in Northern Udmurtia and, according to the latest census, number 2,067 people. They primarily live in rural areas, speak the Besermyan dialect of the Udmurt language, and practice Orthodox Christianity. Their engagement

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.clubhouse.com>

<sup>13</sup> Oleg Tin'kov, entrepreneur and founder of Tinkoff Bank, is officially recognized as a foreign agent in Russia. Олег Тиньков, предприниматель и основатель банка «Тинькофф», официально признан иностранным агентом в России.

with virtual life is relatively recent: the first Besermyan community on VK, titled *MI BESERMANYOS* [WE ARE BESERMYANS], was established in 2012 by S. Antuganov, chairman of the Society of the Besermyan People in the Udmurt Republic, who retained admin rights for several years. For a time, *MI BESERMANYOS* was virtually the only online group for the community, until Besermyan cyber activity surged in 2018. Today, there are more than 19 communities, each with 200 to 500 members on average, and 18 of them, representing the majority, are open. Over time, Besermyans have maintained their online presence, ensuring the continued functionality of these groups.

The digital activity of the Besermyans extends far beyond online interactions, as their virtual life is becoming nearly as significant as their real life. Researcher Elena Popova, a participant of this study, notes that the current membership of the Besermyan VK group *Zhuvam Gurte* exceeds the population of the village of Zhuvam itself. Today, Besermyans often exchange VK contacts rather than phone numbers when meeting new people. Even 90-year-old women have VK accounts, with some actively participating online. At the Second All-Russian Scientific Conference *lazyk, istoriia, kul'tura besermian: Sostoianie i perspektivy issledovaniia* [Besermyan Language, History, Culture: State and Prospects of Research] held on April 20–21, 2023 in Glazov, Udmurtia Republic, several VK group moderators gave presentations, emphasizing the online space's central role in Besermyan life.

What could explain the proactive attitude and openness of Besermyans in virtual spaces? Our research findings suggest two key factors. The first factor is that Besermyans reside in the Republic of Udmurtia, a Russian federal subject that prioritizes the preservation of ethno-cultural heritage. However, state support and special attention are largely directed toward the Udmurt community. As a small-numbered Indigenous group, Besermyans often feel overlooked, and their culture is frequently conflated with that of the Udmurts.

At a conference on Besermyans, Sergey Nevostruev, head of the Zhuvam Community and Culture Center, expressed his concerns: "Sometimes they write that the Besermyan people descended from the ancient Udmurts ... But who are these ancient Udmurts?" Nevostruev criticized the federal media for "broadcasting our costumes while talking about the Udmurts and presenting our song culture as theirs" (Participant 1; Trans. by S. B.). He worries that such confusion and appropriation could render Besermyans' efforts to promote their identity ineffective, as people may never recognize them as a distinct community. Online spaces, however, provide Besermyans with the resources to creatively represent themselves in ways that truly resonate with the community.

The second factor behind the Besermyans' rapid growth online is the sharp decline in their population. When first recorded in the 1926 census, they numbered 10,034. By 2002, this had dropped to 3,122, which is three times fewer than in 1926. Just eight years later, the 2010 census counted only 2,201, marking a further loss of nearly 1,000 people. Faced with the alarming prospect of their ethnic group disappearing, Besermyans sought new ways to sustain and promote their culture. The rise of social networks in the 2010s offered an accessible platform for showcasing their heritage and strengthening cultural ties, both within the community and to the outside world (Belorussova, 2024, pp. 64–67).

In the lead-up to the census that was scheduled for January 27, 2021, the Besermyan community created a VK group titled *Mon—beshcherman. Mon—beçerman. Mon—beserman* [I am a Besermyan]. The first post features a video message from Besermyan leaders: Rafail Dyukin, chairman of the Society of Besermyan Culture in the village of Vortsy, speaking in the native language, and Nadezhda Sidorova, an activist in the Besermyan movement, delivering her address in Russian:

Dear fellow Besermyans, this is the year of the All-Russian census. I urge each of you to identify as Besermyans for the nationality survey question. As the results of the prior census show, we amounted to slightly over two thousand people, but I know this is not all the Besermyans there are. Friends, consider this. It is only by ourselves that we get to preserve the heritage of our ancestors. We, modern Besermyans, can shape our identity and develop our folk culture. We must not let our people disappear from the planet Earth. Besermyans, unite! Inspired by this message and the motto, Rafail Dyukin and I are launching a VK group with the goal of uniting our people. (Mon—beshcherman. Mon—beçerman. Mon—beserman, 2021; Trans. by S. B.)

Over the course of the year, the VK group's administrators promoted Besermyan identity by sharing event updates, producing memos and checklists for the census, and posting photos and videos from the community. The campaign continued until the end of the census in December 2021. The final results showed that the number of people identifying as Besermyan had decreased, though not dramatically: 2,067 individuals registered as Besermyan—a drop of 130 compared to the previous count. Nevertheless, the community celebrated the outcome as a shared achievement, with the group moderators acknowledging the role of the online platform:

*Participant 2:* It is thanks to this online community of ours that we found the Besermyans ... whose soul aches for their people, who wish to contribute to the development of their nation! And so, we did it! The 2067 number against the backdrop of 2201 Besermyans dated 2010 is a pleasant and joyful surprise for a small indigenous people! As a true Besermyan, I am proud of my people! I am beyond grateful to the young Besermyan generation for participating in the census. (Trans. by S. B.)

One of the Besermyan leaders, Alexei Karavaev points out that it was largely through their online presence that some individuals “discovered that they were Besermyans,” which helped achieve strong census results. Today, Besermyan initiatives continue to operate at the intersection of offline and online spaces. As part of the Chebros Festival, participants record videos of themselves reading poems by Besermyan poet Mikhail Fedotov and share them online with the hashtag *#Chebros2023#M\_I\_Fedotov*. These flash mobs often attract numerous participants who treat the activity as a creative challenge, donning national costumes, recreating



the atmosphere of the poet's era, and incorporating sound effects. In June 2023, during the Korban Festival, the organizers installed a window shaped like a smartphone screen, allowing participants to greet fellow community members and send messages to those unable to attend. This way the festival not only engaged attendees in person but also connected them with those watching from afar.

As Anna Vershinina, one of the *Mon—Beshcherma* group administrators, notes, there is currently a tension between digital and traditional culture. She views this not as a constraint but as a source of support:

*Participant 3:* The only way to preserve culture in the modern world is by using cutting-edge means. One nail drives out another: our job is not to oppose the trend but to actively use what the modern age gifts us with today. (Trans. by S. B.)

From Vershinina's perspective, traditional culture must now depend on new forms of representation, including online visibility. For the Besermyans, the opportunity to connect with one another is an undeniable advantage of social media, which has also become a platform for uniting community members across the world and strengthening their sense of ethnic identity.

This being said, the current online openness of the Besermyan community is driven both by the wish to be recognized by others and by the need to preserve their identity. While the external environment of the Besermyans can be seen as an unsatisfactory reality that falls short of expectations, digital tools help to mitigate and offset these negative conditions. The Besermyan experience illustrates how unfavorable real-world circumstances can become an additional incentive for cultural development and online unification.

### The Strategy of Closedness: The Tubalar Experience

In the national ethnographic tradition, the Tubalars are classified as Northern Altaians. They have long inhabited the upper reaches of the Biya River basin and the upper reaches of the Isha River.

Tubalars are usually divided into three ethno-territorial groups according to their residence in the villages of Maiminsky, Turachaksky, and Choysky districts of the Altai Republic. Most Tubalars live in Turachaksky district, near Lake Teletskoye.

Unlike the Besermyans, the Tubalars have a limited presence in public online spaces, with only one to three communities on each social media platform. On VK, there are three groups: *Tubalars. Altai*, *Tubalars*, and *The Chaptygan Community* (The Sacred Mountain). On Odnoklassniki, there are also three communities: *Tubalars*, *The Tubalars of Choysky District*, and *The Chern Taiga Tubalars*. Telegram hosts a single channel titled *Tubalars*, and Instagram<sup>14</sup> features two themed accounts: *Tubalars* and *Choysky District Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples Community*. Only one

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group on VK and two pages on Odnoklassniki show signs of user activity; the rest are mostly inactive.

While the online data might suggest that the Tubalars have little interest in maintaining a public digital presence, field research reveals a different picture: they do interact online but prefer private group chats on WhatsApp and Telegram.

For example, on WhatsApp there is an *Altyn Kel Indigenous Minorities* group chat where users discuss the legal, cultural, and social life of the community, while the Tubalars group chat serves as a space for exploring family trees and sharing posts, announcements, and Q&As relevant to the indigenous peoples. There are also several groups dedicated to learning the native tongue, namely *Törön Tylym* and *We study tuba til*, alongside the family and ancestral groups such as *Törönnor*.

Tatyana Balasheva, creator of the *Törön Tylym* [Native Language] group chat, has been working for several years on a Tubalar language textbook that will include sections on grammar, a self-study guide, and a phrasebook. She notes that community members have long awaited such a resource and regularly inquire about its progress. The closed *Törön Tylym* group chat extends her offline textbook project into the digital space, where she posts assignments for those wishing to learn Tubalar:

*Participant 4:* I created this group chat as a means to educate. Let's say the first lesson goes easily. It is about Tubalar kinship relations and forms of addressing one another. But as we go on, everything becomes more and more complicated. Say, when I first faced a task of explaining endings in words or plural form affixes online, I realized that it was impossible to carry on with this project via WhatsApp. (Trans. by S. B.)

As of today, the private group chat *Törön Tylym* is primarily focused on day-to-day interaction between Tubalars. Balasheva uses the group chat to share updates on the progress of her Tubalar language textbook and receives ongoing support from community members.

As in the Besermyan case, the Tubalars' choice of an online positioning model is closely tied to the external and internal conditions shaping their identity in the real world. The most significant factor driving their preference for closed online spaces was the events of early 2022, when their trailblazing organization *Tuba Kalyk*<sup>15</sup> [Tubalar People] was added to the federal registry of foreign agents. According to the organization's spokesman, Tair Bodroshev, this designation was imposed solely because the group had received funding from the World Wildlife Fund to train public observers in monitoring deforestation in Altai. The foreign agent status came as a shock to the Tubalars, who were unable to obtain any explanation from the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. Authorities claimed that, despite the project's environmental focus, it had caused serious harm.

The "foreign agent" label carries a deeply negative connotation, as in Soviet times it was primarily applied to traitors and anti-Soviet propagandists. This historical

<sup>15</sup> The organization is officially included in the Register of Foreign Agents by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/pages/reestr-inostryannykh-agentov>. Организация официально признана Министерством юстиции Российской Федерации в качестве иностранного агента.

legacy shapes the current perception of the term, which is why assigning this status to the community's key organization fueled a widespread assumption that all Tubalars were foreign agents. Although some media outlets later clarified that the designation applied only to the organization itself (smirnova, 2022), the stigma persisted. For instance, "Tubalars foreign agents" remains the second autocomplete suggestion offered by Yandex, a popular search engine in Russia.

Having received the foreign agent status, Tubalars began seeking support from residents of Gorny Altai. For example, Tair Bodroshev commented on a post on *Gorny Altai News*: "SUPPORT US, FRIENDS" (Tair, 2022; Trans. by S. B.). The response, however, was lukewarm. A user with the alias Gorozhanin [Citizen] replied: "Serves you right. How about you go and work now! You haven't accomplished anything useful anyway! Look at you, protecting neither your people nor the land!" (Gorozhanin, 2022; Trans. by S. B.).

Meanwhile, another user, Mia, added:

Would you look at this photo: can you see a group of nice, friendly, smiling people ... I'm surprised by the backdrop though: these dilapidated huts and a leaning broken fence are particularly charming. Just look at what makes up our current reality. I would never believe that the funding they received would've been substantial enough to put the foreign agent label on them. (Mia, 2022; Trans. by S. B.)

According to Lyudmila Varvanets, Chairperson of the Committee on National Policy and Public Relations of the Altai Republic, the Tubalar case elicited more sympathy than condemnation:

*Participant 5:* I had to explain that the legislation of the Russian Federation has changed, particularly regarding those who receive funding from neighboring, not always friendly, states. Under such conditions, your position may not really be your position at all, but the position of those who fund you. (Trans. by S. B.)

A second reason for online closedness of the Tubalars is the threat of external forces. Tubalars, who primarily live along the shores of Lake Teletskoye, fear losing their lands as entrepreneurs and investors increasingly turn their attention to the area. At first glance, the Federal Law No. 82-FZ *O garantiakh prav korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [On Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Minorities of the Russian Federation] (1999) appears to protect the ancestral habitats, traditional ways of life, economic activities, and trades of small-numbered peoples. However, as Tubalar activist Natalia Kocheganova (Participant 6) points out, it is extremely difficult to navigate the various tenders initiated by the Ministry of Natural Resources for the purchase of natural sites, and participation is nearly impossible.

Recently, a Tubalar organization secured a plot of land in the village of Artybash, where Tubalars plan to build two ethnically themed shopping malls. The effort to protect native lands extends beyond the Tubalars themselves; local residents of all

ethnicities are invested in safeguarding the area. Using the framework of Tubalar rights, they collectively defend their land, aiming to preserve authenticity and resist external influence.

Unlike Besermyans, Tubalars do not face population decline. Between the 2010 and 2021 censuses, their population nearly doubled, growing from 1,964 to 3,620. Tubalars also advocate monitoring those who self-identify as Tubalar, arguing that some claim the identity to gain the benefits afforded to indigenous peoples without contributing to the preservation or development of traditional culture.

This mindset extends to how Tubalars present their identity externally. While they engage in virtual spaces, their primary focus is communication. Recent events suggest that their efforts are not simply about online seclusion but rather about implementing a deliberate strategy to protect their culture from external pressures.

### The Strategy of Closedness: The Soyot Experience

Soyots are concentrated in Okinsky district, specifically in Sorok and Orlik villages, and in Tunkinsky district, notably Mondy village, of the Republic of Buryatia. However, the overwhelming majority still reside in Okinsky district, which is why they are often referred to in academic literature as Okinsky Soyots (Zhukovskaia, 1994, p. 12). Their subsistence patterns and way of life are closest to those of taiga hunters and reindeer herders (Mongush, 2012). Similar to the Tubalars, Soyots are poorly represented in open virtual spaces. There are two groups on VK: *Sayan Uula* and *The Ethnographic Museum of the Peoples of Transbaikial*. Odnoklassniki hosts only one group, called *Soyots*, while no Telegram channels or group chats were identified.

It is important, however, to take a closer look at the activity of the existing Soyot online spaces. The *Sayan Uula* community lacks a clear ethnic focus and primarily presents itself as a tourist-oriented group: *Sayan Uula Sports Organization Group*. *The Ins and Outs of the Oka River: Tours around Okinsky District*. The group is administered by Sultim Bazarov, a Soyot from the Orlik settlement, and Soyot-specific posts can be located through dedicated hashtags. *The Ethnographic Museum of the Peoples of Transbaikial group* is multi-ethnic and features Soyot culture alongside other ethnic groups of Buryatia. The *Soyots* group on Odnoklassniki, created in 2012, has seen little activity and remains largely inactive.

Why do Soyots exhibit such low online presence and activity? The main reason is territorial remoteness. Although Soyot region is rich in natural sites that could attract tourists, it is difficult to reach Orlik, the district's administrative center. To get there from the settlement of Mondy, located near the Russian–Mongolian border in Buryatia, one has to drive 150 km along a gravel road, which can be hazardous for inexperienced drivers. Even upon arrival, specialized vehicles such as “Ural” dump-trucks are needed to access tourist spots, making the trip both time-consuming and costly. Many Soyots, however, view the absence of tourist traffic positively, as it helps preserve the area's pristine environment. As tour organizer Sultim Bazarov notes,

*Participant 7:* The abysmal bottleneck road here serves as a deterrent factor which definitely helps protect the environment. Many are happy that the road impedes the tourist flow, however, economically ... If there were a decent road, we would see a steady flow of tourists. Based on my experience though, I'd say things are better the way they are, with the current road and all. (Trans. by S. B.)

Another factor is frequent power outages, blackouts, and telecommunications failures. Disruptions often last for weeks, yet locals see them as routine. As one Orlik resident explained, when long outages disable freezers, she simply spends the day making *buuzes* (meat dumplings) to keep food from spoiling.

This "closedness" can be seen as natural rather than externally imposed, stemming from the region's environment and geography. Surrounded by mountains, Soyots describe themselves as modest, with no wish to stand out. They see little need to establish an online presence:

*Participant 8:* We get by and find ways of talking amongst each other somehow. Plus, we definitely don't want to be telling the world about ourselves. In general, there is no showing off mindset or any desire to be sharing things online. (Trans. by S. B.)

As a result, Buryat Soyots are minimally engaged in virtual life, valuing face-to-face interaction over digital communication.

Nevertheless, Soyots actively sustain their ethnic identity through traditional practices. Families gather annually at ancestral sites, often at river mouths, to socialize and share food. They also connect their heritage to Lake Ilchir, which is considered the birthplace of the Soyots. Not long ago, they won a national contest on ethno-cultural tourism with their project *Ilchir, the Treasure of the Soyots*. The project's centerpiece is the ethnocomplex *Ilchir*, an open-air museum founded in 2009 to preserve Soyot culture. While locals support such initiatives, they emphasize that Ilchir remains a sacred place and should, therefore, be kept pristine both spiritually and physically.

The second reason for Soyot closedness is their multi-ethnic identity, as most identify as both Buryat and Soyot. In the Soviet period, intermarriages between undeclared Soyots and Buryats meant that today there are virtually no "pure" Soyots. Adults often trace their Soyot ancestry back two or three generations, with 1/4 or 1/8 heritage, while children may trace it back four or five generations, with 1/16 or 1/32 ancestry. Although all still identify as Soyot, many acknowledge that Buryat heritage predominates. When asked why she identifies as Soyot rather than Buryat, a resident of Orlik replied: "As long as we have even a quarter of Soyot blood in us, at least some of it, we feel like Soyots" (Participant 9; Trans. by S. B.). A school headmistress in Ulus Sorok added: "These are our ancestors. They were all Soyots and they lived right here" (Participant 10; Trans. by S. B.). Blood ties, along with territorial attachment, remain central to self-identification. Elena Tsymbaeva, the head of the Orlik archives, observed: "For me, identifying as a Soyot is driven by desire to revive our roots and traditions. This is where our ancestors lived. You aren't a human almost if you do not know or value your family tree" (Participant 11; Trans. by S. B.).

This sensitivity to ancestry is a key feature of Soyot narratives. Respect for ancestors and kin is seen as a personality trait, and mixed heritage is perceived as different parts of oneself that all deserve recognition. In this sense, Soyot identity is multiple and diverse. Registered as Soyots, they also identify as Buryats: they speak the Buryat language, celebrate its festivals, and perform its rituals. This ethnic syncretism is mirrored by religious syncretism. As Angelika, a Soyot woman, explains: “I’ve got eight kinds of blood. I go see a lama, a shaman, and sometimes I even light a candle in church for my Russian relatives” (Participant 12; Trans. by S. B.).

Interestingly, residents of Okinsky District, even though they are registered as Soyots, often speak of Soyots in the third person: “they had their own language,” “they were reindeer herders,” or “we never found their costumes.” As local historian Alexei Papaev, himself a Soyot, comments: “They do not perceive themselves as Soyots, but they refer to themselves as Soyots” (Participant 13; Trans. by S. B.). This reveals both a sense of continuity and an awareness of distance from their ancestors.

Similar to Tubalars, Soyots show a steady population growth on the census. The 2002 census registered 2,769 people as Soyots, while the 2010 census accounted for 3,608 Soyots, and the 2020 census numbers increased to a total of 4,368 people. Based on these numbers we see that the Soyot population increased by 17.4% between the years of 2010 and 2021 and by 36.6% overall between the 2002 and 2021 censuses. Thus, it could be said that choosing the Soyot identity in the census is less about biological lineage and more about preserving ancestral memory and ties to their homeland.

In the digital space, Soyots emphasize territory and heritage rather than ethnicity itself. For instance, in the *Sayan Uula* group, administrator Sultim Bazarov posts mainly about trips to natural and cultural sites in the Okinsky district. Blogger Alexei Papaev highlights the natural heritage of the Sayan Mountains, local traditions, and archaeological monuments. In this way, Soyots avoid presenting themselves as a separate ethnic group, instead defining identity through landscape, ancestry, and collective memory—elements that bind their multi-ethnic heritage and sustain hopes for future generations.

### Transitional Model: The Nagaybak Experience

The Nagaybaks predominantly inhabit Nagaybak district of Chelyabinsk region. They are Orthodox by religion, Turkic-speaking by language, and historically belonged to the Cossack estate. Online, Nagaybaks are well represented: they have more than 17 groups on VK, three on Odnoklassniki, and a Telegram channel. The largest, *Nagaybak World* on Odnoklassniki, has 912 members. Most VK groups were created between 2010 and 2018, but none stands out as central, as each is moderated by different users and activists with specific interests. Alongside museum groups, there are communities dedicated to key elements of identity—language, religion, and Cossack heritage.

The most active exchanges, however, take place in village chats such as *Overheard in Parizh*, rather than in explicitly “ethnic” Nagaybak groups. Another type of

online community is formed by Nagaybaks who have moved away. For example, online community *St. Pete Nagaybaks*, created by Peter Yuskin from Ostrolensky, aimed to support migrants from Nagaybak district to St. Petersburg. Although the group has been inactive for several years, its creation probably served as psychological support for Yuskin himself, who was looking to find his tribesmen in a new place. Similarly, *Paris and the Parisians*, launched by Dmitry and Victoria Kadykeev from the village of Parizh (whose name echoes “Paris” in Russian), saw little sustained activity; today, it mostly attracts posts about moving not to Parizh in Nagaybak district, but to Paris, France.

More than half of Nagaybak groups are now inactive, often created ad hoc without long-term goals. The early 2010s saw a burst of online activity and self-representation, but the past five years have been marked by decline: discussions are rare and bloggers have stopped posting. One striking initiative was that of 78-year-old Olga Baryshnikova, who in 2015 began translating the VK interface into Nagaybak language. Although praised in the media, her project was never completed (Belorussova, 2023).

The decline of Nagaybak online activity reflects broader shifts in their identity. As with other groups, digital engagement has often been sparked by real-life events. Since their emergence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Nagaybak identity has been shaped by turbulent historical circumstances. In the Soviet era, they were classified as Tatars and lost recognition as a distinct people, regaining visibility only in the post-Soviet period. The 1990s and 2000s brought a surge of self-awareness: they established village museums, organized cultural projects such as *Iz Parizha v Parizh* [From Paris to Paris] (Belorussova, 2014), and founded numerous music groups. A key loss, however, was the 2012 fire that destroyed the museum in Ostrolensky, erasing much of the material heritage. Since then, festivals have become smaller and more localized.

Today, both real and virtual Nagaybak life appears more subdued. Rather than emphasizing distinction from others, they focus on internal self-search, reflected in sporadic content updates in personal accounts and local groups.

Recent events, however, have reignited activity. In November 2023, Nagaybaks created the VK community *Nagaibak\_Frontu* [Nagaybaks for the Front Lines], which is now one of the most popular. While not ethnic in content, it mobilizes residents of Nagaybak district under the banner of historic duty: “Nagaibaki vseгда stoiali na strazhe svoei rodiny!” [Nagaybaks have always stood guard over their homeland!] (Trans. by S. B.). In May 2023, they raised funds to send a UAZ-452 vehicle marked *Nagaybak* to the front lines; after its destruction in early 2024, fundraising resumed for repairs.

Another moment of collective mobilization came during an outbreak of African swine fever in Ostrolensky. When authorities ordered the culling of pigs, locals resisted, posting a video message to the Chelyabinsk governor invoking their Cossack heritage and ancestral loyalty to their homeland. They also recalled the legend of Nagaybak ancestors watering horses in Paris fountains during the 1813–1814 campaigns. Soon after, a song titled *Nagaybaks Saving Their Pigs* appeared online featuring lyrics like: “We are Ostrolensky residents, we are Nagaybaks, you can’t touch us, we are ferocious dogs,” and “Even if you gather all the special forces, you won’t get our pigs” (Trans. by S. B.). The song quickly spread through Nagaybak digital spaces, becoming a local hit.

These examples show that contemporary Nagaybak online identity is situational. Ethnic expression resurfaces in moments of perceived threat or duty, whether defending farms or supporting the military operation. In quieter times, online activity fades, suggesting that Nagaybak identity today is not continuously expressed but activated by circumstance. This situational quality, however, remains central to their self-awareness and sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

The cases reviewed reveal how tightly physical and digital worlds are now intertwined in shaping ethnic communities' self- and cultural expression. Digital spaces act like a mirror, reflecting real-life processes with surprising clarity. The Besermians embrace openness online to gain recognition, while the Tubalars, faced with uncertain surroundings, limit their interactions to their own community. For the Soyots, geographic remoteness drives their digital closedness. These patterns are not fixed, however: the Nagaybaks, for example, become more active and open under challenging conditions, yet retreat into closed networks when ethnic life is stable.

Together, these examples show the remarkable adaptability of ethnic cultures. Virtuality does more than coexist with reality—it actively shapes cultural practices, social connections, and strategic choices within these communities, revealing a dynamic landscape where tradition and technology continuously interact.

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<sup>16</sup> Open Society Foundation founded by George Soros is recognized as organization whose activities undesirable in the Russian Federation. Фонд Открытое общество, основанный Дж. Соросом, является организацией, деятельность которой признана нежелательной на территории Российской Федерации. <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7756>