

## Picking the Right Age

Generally, teachers say that the best age to start education in religious cultures is in the younger grades and the earlier the better. By the fifth grade, the kids already have a “character.” By contrast, it is possible to talk to young people about God in simple words. In these cases, however, one gets the feeling that the teachers would prefer teaching kids at a younger age because they fear “adult” questions which they cannot answer because of insufficient religious and methodological preparation. According to the Ulyanovsk Pedagogical University’s Lyubov Guryleva, at a younger age, the teacher is still an unquestioned authority and teaching spiritual culture possibly will be more effective. On the other hand, this involves a certain amount of force, with the imposition of values, including religious ones, because the child at this age is defenseless before adults and not prepared to make a conscious choice.

Many specialists think that the age chosen for the courses was not the best possible. The children who have finished elementary school are adapting to a new situation at middle school where they have a different teacher for each subject. Second, at age 10–11 children are going through a crucial middle period and are becoming more

“critical.” Information from adults is often received with great doubt. Children can only understand the abstract concept of God when they are nearer the higher classes, when they are more self-aware. Shame appears in children when they are 8–9 years old, specifically when a child knows that he did something wrong and is afraid that someone else will find out about it. Only at the age of 15–16 do (a minority of) children start to develop a conscience, when they are embarrassed in front of themselves regardless of whether anyone else knows about it. At this moment, they start on the path of autonomous morality and this is the source of genuine religiosity. Smart Orthodox priests and psychologists understand that helping a person develop faith, one can only operate on what is already in the person and not on what might eventually be there.

When I visited the second grade at a private gymnasium, I conducted a series of short interviews with the children. They said things like: “We learned a lot of interesting things, what happened before our era and after.” “We learned about icons and churches, what happened long ago. I learned about God and how to read Orthodox Christian books.” Only one boy said that the topic was difficult, boring, and not interesting to him.

### *About the Author*

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## ANALYSIS

## Siberian Regionalism Today

By Anton Sveshnikov, Omsk

### **Abstract**

With a long history reaching to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, neo-regionalist ideas continue to carry weight in Siberia. But the movement as a whole has had little success attracting support among the political and business elite or ambitious young people. Accordingly, neo-regionalist promoters are continuing to try to increase the popularity of their ideas.

### **Classical Regionalism**

The precursor of contemporary separatist (or regionalist) ideas in Siberia and a model that the ideologists of Siberian independence often refer to is the social political movement of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was known as Siberian Oblastnichestvo (Siberian Regionalism). Among the representatives of this movement were such prominent social activists as Nikolai Yadrintsev and Grigorii

Potantin. The basic ideas of the movement were laid out in Yadrintsev’s book *Siberia as a Colony* (1882), which became the “Bible of *Oblastnichestvo*.”

Yadrintsev’s ideas can be summarized as follows: under current conditions, Siberia is a colony. Necessary reforms, aimed at improving this situation, include, in particular, ending the use of Siberia as a place to send criminals from the European parts of Russia; developing a system of measures allowing the growth of Sibe-

rian industry, culture, and education; creating local self-government bodies in Siberia, and changing state policy toward the indigenous peoples of Siberia.

This essentially liberal movement developed through several stages. However, beginning with the famous “Case of the Siberian Separatists” (1865–8), the authorities were constantly exerting pressure on it. The height of Siberian separatism came in 1918 with the adoption of the “Declaration of Siberian Independence” and the creation of the Siberian Oblast Duma. But given the Civil War raging at the time, this action had no real practical consequences. The same Temporary Siberian Government that adopted the declaration revoked it three months later and the Siberian Duma was disbanded. Following the establishment of the Soviet Union, Siberian separatism practically came to an end. Soviet historiography took a negative view of *oblastnichestvo*, describing it as “bourgeois separatism.”

### Revival of the Regionalist Idea

The revival of the regionalist idea in Siberia took place in the years after Gorbachev announced his Perestroika policy. During this time, a number of social organizations advocating the idea of “Siberian independence from the center” began to appear in the large cities of Eastern Siberia. Irkutsk became a center for this kind of activity. By contrast, there were no visible groups animated by this idea in Western Siberia. The most famous of the East Siberian movements were the Baikal Popular Front (1988 and then recreated in 2006) and the Liberating Army of Siberia (1998), which renamed itself as the Oblast Alternative of Siberia (OAS) in 2000. This movement periodically cooperated on the regional level with various opposition parties (Yabloko and LDPR) and published its own newspaper *Baikal News* (*Baikal'skievesti*). The Popular Front published its own periodical, *Shaman-Kamen'*. Representatives of these movements and activists publically expressing sympathy for the ideas of neo-regionalism simultaneously served in local government bodies.

### The Social-Political Program of Neo-Regionalism

The main ideologists of contemporary neo-regionalism are the leader of OAS, the Irkutsk journalist Mikhail Kulekhov and the Moscow journalist and historian (born in the Siberian city of Achinsk) Dmitry Verkhoturov. Despite all the differences in their views (Verkhoturov actively criticizes classical regionalism and considers the Russian colonization of Siberia as a bloody annexation, destroying the high culture of the indigenous Siberian peoples), it is possible to identify several major common elements in their political program. This

program sharply criticizes the status quo system of political and economic relations in which Moscow exploits Siberia as a “raw material appendage,” seeing it essentially as an unlimited reservoir of oil and gas.

The neo-regionalists propose a radical reform of the political system in Russia, aimed at creating a federal system with real rights for self-governance. Within the framework of this federalism, it is necessary first to reexamine the system of distributing financial resources in the form of taxes and other fiscal revenues to increase the share of the regions (no longer giving everything to Moscow). The second step is redistributing power. The federal center should deal with issues of foreign policy and defense, while the regional governments address questions regarding “domestic affairs,” including education, health care, and the development of culture. Third is giving the Siberian regions the right to adopt independent decisions in the economic and legal spheres with neighboring states. In the areas of economic and cultural relations, the Siberian Federation should seek to realize its own (Siberian) interests in strategic partnership with the countries of Central Asia and the Far East. The regional authorities should, using the potential they have accumulated, enable the development in Siberia of a modernizing productive economy and science, thereby overcoming Siberia's status as a “raw material appendage” and staunching the “brain drain.” Given this program, there are considerable continuities between the classical regionalism of the nineteenth century and contemporary neo-regionalism regarding the political status of Siberia.

### Contexts

The activity of the neo-regionalists is evolving in a context that favors their goals. First, in various layers of the Siberian population there is a naturally growing dissatisfaction with the policies of the center and the economic and demographic situation in the region. Periodically in Irkutsk there are protest actions, which increasingly use the white and green (Siberian) flag. According to the Director of the Irkutsk Center for Independent Social Research and Education Mikhail Rozhansky “from rally to rally, the anti-colonial pathos and anti-Moscow rhetoric grows.” Even the governors of the region periodically speak about “Siberian” interests and criticize the policy of the center. A prominent example was Tomsk Governor Viktor Kress's speech at the Siberian Agreement regional association in 2006.

Second, various cultural groups now actively use the concept of an original “Siberian culture” and even “Siberians as their own nation.” For example, in 2005, the Siberian Internet project “Siberskaya vol'gota” (<http://www.volgota.com/>) was established to propagate the idea of a Siberian language that differed from Russian. From

the beginning of the 2000s, a group of Siberian artists (V. Bugaev, E. Dorokhov, B. Mironov), art historians, and curators actively propagandized the idea of a new Siberian style in pictorial art—Siberskayaarkheo-art. From 2008, the journal *Unknown Siberia* has been published in Novosibirsk. The classics of regionalism long ago became central elements in defining Siberian identity. These works are being republished and there are various events and conferences dedicated to them. Additionally, many statues and other memorials are being erected in honor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century regionalists.

Nevertheless, one should not overestimate the positive nature of the social political context for the regionalist movement. The administrative elite today is too heavily dependent on the “center.” Accordingly, Kress’s statement noted above is more the exception than the rule. In the official media controlled by the authorities, there are almost no stories about neo-regionalism as a political tendency. In official discourse, such ideas simply do not exist. At the same time, the media actively exaggerates the idea of a “Chinese threat,” which would unite the territory of Siberia and the Far East to China. A first indicator of this danger is seen in the massive illegal migration of Chinese to these regions. In state media the neo-regional tendency implicitly can only exist in stories about Siberian “self-identity,” for example, in the broadcasts of the Siberian cultural channel.

The members of United Russia, who formally make up the leadership of the region, naturally, given the name of their party, speak out against any form of separatism. This party consistently wins a majority of votes in all elections.

The regional economic elite, whose significance is obviously weakened by the entrance into the Siberian market of large national and transnational corporations, such as Gazprom and Norilsknikel, also is not interested in such political projects. Its main goal is stability. Siberian businessmen have become accustomed to realizing their interests in the conditions of the existing regime. And in this case, neo-regionalism, with its calls for radical reform of the political system, is seen by the economic elite as a threat to stability. If in the 1990s, the political and economic elite could “play” in neo-federal games, in the 2000s interest in such topics among economic leaders is much lower. However, the neo-regionalists are targeting precisely these groups with their message.

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#### *Additional Reading:*

- Verkhoturov, D., *Pokorenie Sibiri: mify i real'nosti*, Moscow, 2005.
- Verkhoturov, D., *Ideia sibirskoi samostoitel'nosti vchera i segodnia*, Moscow, 2009

The political elite of Kazakhstan, to whom some of the neo-regionalist leaders occasionally appeal prefer not to intervene in the “internal affairs” of Russia.

Scholars and university lecturers in the Siberian region are institutionally strongly dependent on the federal government and therefore the majority of them do not openly support the political program of regionalism.

Ambitious young people, who potentially could be a social base for the neo-regionalist movement also have managed to accommodate themselves to the existing “colonial” regime. The basic mechanism for the younger generation to realize their plans is through greater geographical mobility. Increasingly the graduates of Siberian universities are trying to make their career and achieve their potential by moving to the center, either Moscow or St. Petersburg. The geographic trajectory of a successful career was already clear in Soviet times (if not earlier): “From the village to the city, from a provincial city to the capital.” It is clear that the neo-regional perspective, requiring the rejection of such a life strategy, has little interest for young people. However, a small number of students periodically participate in some neo-regionalist actions. Rural residents, industrial workers, and pensioners mainly back the paternal model of a strong state.

Thus, the only potential allies of the neo-regionalists are the political elite of the national-cultural autonomies (Tyva, Khakassia, Gorno Altai) who are seeking to “build small nations.” But the programs of these groups are mainly aimed at ethnic goals and their activity has been declining during the 2000s.

It is clear that the neo-regionalist movement opposes the federal government’s policy of building a strict and effective vertical of power. Nevertheless, the federal government sees these few and insignificant groups as a way to let off steam, publically limiting them through informal comments to the governors not to “play with separatism.” The one real exception was the Federal Security Service warning in 2000 about the extremist character of the AOS, which resulted in the organization changing its name, but not its acronym.

Overall, it is clear that the chances of realizing a neo-regionalist program are not great. Accepting this reality, the ideologists of this movement have set themselves the goal of forming a wide social base by popularizing their views.