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**DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A WAY OF SAVING ETHNIC AND CULTURAL  
IDENTITY OF MIGRANT CHILDREN**

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**Abstract:** *The relevance of the research topic is determined by the fact that the number of people involved in the international migration process is increasing annually. On the one hand, it is important to integrate migrant children into the social and cultural system of the host country. On the other hand, it should be taken into account the issue of preserving of their ethnic and cultural identity. In this regard, preserving ethnic and cultural identity of children who migrate with their parents is an important issue.*

*The purpose of this article is to show the opportunity of using distance education methods in preserving migrant children's ethnical and cultural identity. The research was carried out in 2016-2017 and on the territory of six European countries and in Belgorod region (Russia), and was based on the use of in-depth interviews as well as focus groups with migrants.*

*The results showed the following. First, migrants have difficulties to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity in the host country, it is especially truly for migrant children who much faster than adults can integrate into the host community and lose their ethnic and cultural identity. Secondly, the Internet provides to children an access to wide range of educational resources regardless of the area of their residence. Most of these trainings are conducted in native language, in the traditional ethno-cultural context. Third, the content of distance learning can be individual, depending on age, previous education, personal interests, etc. Fourth, distance education can be used by migrant children as well as the whole migrant community. Fifth, distance education can include a range of disciplines and activities specific to particular ethno-cultural groups of migrants (linguistics, religious studies, history, literature, cooking, crafts, etc.).*

**Keywords:** *migrant children; distance education; ethnic and cultural identity.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Every year, the Internet provides more and more opportunities for people in order to improve their educational and cultural levels. There is increasing number of people who wish to study abroad and to get an international education. In this case, the Internet can be seen as a major tool of educational resources for different social groups, for example migrants. Through distance education a person can realize his/her rights to education and receive appropriate information in his/her native language. Also the Internet allows migrants to ensure their children an opportunity to receive different kinds of education on preschool, school and professional levels.

In the past decade the number of people involved in the migration process is increased tremendously. On the one hand, the obvious challenge is the integration of migrant children in the socio-cultural system of the host country, on the other hand is the preservation of their ethnic and

cultural identity. The purpose of this article is to present the results of the research which can demonstrate the use of distance education as a tool of preserving ethnic and cultural identity of migrant children.

### **1.1 Distance education and ethno-cultural identity of migrant children**

The importance of e-learning technologies for the integration of migrants in the host community expands annually. Distance education is seen as an effective way to prepare migrants for passing the language examination. For example, the issue of passing the Russian language exam makes a real challenge for those entering Russia or planning to do it. In this situation distance learning technologies that are used in the national testing centers can be very helpful for legal migrant workers from different countries. And the e-learning is a perspective education form for the candidates who decided to work in Russia [1]. According to the research, more than 60 % of China's migrant children are left behind in rural areas, primarily because they have limited access to education [2].

Programs for migrant children's integration are functioning in almost every country faced with the mass migration. For example, in the United States [3], the Netherlands [4], Germany [5], Greece [6] they are based on the concept of multicultural education with considering ethnic, cultural and religious features of the newcomers. In contrast in France [7] and Russia [8] the programs focus on the formation of monoculture, especially based on linguistic and ethno-cultural integration.

The loss of ethno-cultural identity of migrant children (traditions, language, values, norms, life styles) leads to the following consequences: the crisis of ethnic identity; the formation of marginal personality; proliferation of various forms of deviant (antisocial, addictive) behavior; family conflicts; the loss of connection with their historical roots.

In recent years the separation and marginalization of migrants can be seen in most Western European countries, where there are ethnic areas, emigrant neighborhoods and urban ghettos [9]. For example, during the past three decades the culture of tolerance towards newcomers has been developed in the UK [10], but Brexit (this is an abbreviation for "British exit", the term means the exit of the UK from the European Union) has shown the crises of British democracy, the unavailability of British society to fully accept migrants' values, including different language, religion, life style and backgrounds [11].

### **1.2 Data and mythology**

The authors of this article were carried out the research in 2016-2017 in order to study the needs and the attitudes of migrants to distance education of their children, providing in their native language; its results are presented here.

The research had two stages. On the first stage the research took place from March 2016 till January 2017 on the territory of six countries: Germany (Munich), Italy (Rome, Padua), Portugal (Lisbon), the UK (Birmingham), Israel (Tel Aviv), Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg) (n=56). The object of the study was migrants from Pridnestrovie who are living and working in these countries nowadays. The main method was focus groups (n=8). In order to make the research special rooms were rented. Focus group participants were selected on the following criteria: 1) nationality (migrants from Pridnestrovie); 2) staying in the host country for more than 3 years; 3) the age of the respondents from 20 to 70; 4) the presence of children; 5) the purpose of staying into the host country is the labor migration. The initial selection of the respondents was carried out by the "snowball". On the second step from the original list we selected 8 participants who were representatives of their generation.

On the second stage in January 2017 the research was carried out in Belgorod region (Dmitrievky district, Russia) using in-depth interviews with Meskhetian Turks (n=12) who are living among the Russian-speaking community. The interviews were taken place at the cultural establishment located in the settlement.

## II. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The preservation of ethno-cultural identity of migrant children occurs mainly through the informal institutions such as their social networks or extended families. Relatives and members of the migrant social networks cannot provide children with fully ethnic and cultural information about their home country. According to the study most migrant children can maintain oral knowledge of their native language, but one third of them can't read or write on it.

Also representatives of the older generation do not have enough skills to use the Internet or any distance technologies in order to teach their children in their native language. Every second migrant could not clearly explain what distance learning is. The use of distance technologies are strongly correlated with the parents' age. Parents up to 40 years old are more likely to use Internet and other gadgets than older family members. Anyway, their capabilities are limited by the lack of time, pedagogical skills, information regarding educational resources.

### 2.1. The attitude of migrants from Pridnestrovie to distance education

Ethno-cultural identity of migrant children occurs through formal institutions such as officially registered religious communities and Diasporas which in some cases can become channels of young migrants' radicalization. One of the participants of the focus group said:

*"Improving the educational and cultural levels of our children and youth contributes to the disappearance of harmful radicalization. On the contrary, the children begin to respect the culture of their ancestors as well as the culture of the host community. This is valuable. Distance learning prevents youth from harmful thoughts. And the time goes with some benefits" (Businessman, agricultural industry, male, 45 years old, Israel).*

According to the focus group participants' opinion, the difficulties mentioned above would be overcome by obtaining a distance education. *"I hope all my family will come back in Pridnestrovie in a few years. And our children will continue their education in schools and universities there. But children will have to get used to the education system adopted in the home country. We would like our children to study in Pridnestrovian schools. The distance education could be the solution. In this case, our children would save their language skills as well as be acquainted with the rules, existed in the education system in Pridnestrovie. And it would be easier to prepare for entering the university. Of course, universities provide preparatory distance learning courses. Unfortunately, schools don't. It's very pity" (School teacher, education, female, 39 years old, Italy).*

Migrant children use the following methods of e-learning: network teaching aids, computer training systems, audio and video materials, training equipment with distant access, virtual laboratories, digital libraries, computer Funds assessment tools for monitoring and self-control.

Focus group participants express the opinion that distance education is almost the only tool of preserving ethnic and cultural identity of children who migrated together with their parents. There are number of limitations for migrant children in getting education in a host country:

- migrant children may not go to school because they have to work at home (babysitting, helping parents, making money, etc.);
- they do not know the language of the host country and do not understand the educational material at schools;
- the low educational background of their parents, the hard living conditions may prevent them from education;
- the territorial focus of migration is different, that's why migrant children cannot use the same methods of preserving their ethnic and cultural identity.

Referring to migrants, participated in focus groups, which have left Pridnestrovie and now are living in Russia, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Great Britain, and Israel, only 1.5% of their children are getting education, using e-learning technologies. Most of children are getting education at institutions of Moldova, Pridnestrovie, Russia, and Romania. One of the main selection criteria of an education institution is the language of learning, which is native or close to children. So in Russia, Great Britain, Israel and Germany the share of Russian-speaking immigrants exceeds the number of migrants from other nationalities. In Italy and Portugal the share of Pridnestrovian Moldavian is very high. This fact is explained in terms of the language factor, because Moldovan language belongs to the same language

group as Italian and Portuguese that facilitates the adaptation of the Moldovan migrants in these countries.

The study shows that the vast majority of Pridnestrovie population speaks Russian. This is one of the main reasons why migrants from Pridnestrovie select Russia as the host country (85.0% – 90.0%). In other countries we have identified the following patterns of migrants' behavior. Firstly, the use of the host country's language to communicate with family members is most often associated with either an official marriage or cohabitation with a representative of the local community, or with the work in the household sector or living in the employer's household. Secondly, migrants tend to keep their native language as a communication tool with compatriots, who are employed at the same community, household or a working sector.

As in the first and in the second cases, distance learning technologies more often are used by migrants and their children when they have permanent work, salary and stable housing in the host country and they wish to stay there. Moreover, migrants are trying to arrange full-time study for their children while adults prefer to receive education skills, using distance learning technologies and get diploma of the host country.

Parents, who participated at focus groups, consider the issue of saving of their children's ethnic and cultural identity as very important. But the main ascent they make on children's integration into the local community, and consider full-time study at school as a resource of this integration.

## **2.2. The attitude of Meskhetian Turks to distance education**

First three families of Meskhetian Turks came to Belgorod region (Dmitrieskiy district) in 1989 after the Fergana massacre in the Uzbek SSR. During the period 1990 - 1995 the other 15 Muslim families came to the village. Now there are 341 Meskhetian Turks there. In Belgorod region there are some long-term programs regarding the development of the territory especially in the agriculture sector, such as "The Development of Agriculture of Belgorod region in 2013-2020 years", «Strategy of formation of solidarity society in 2011 - 2025 years", which are providing a range of activities for social and economic development of rural areas; to prevent the outflow of the residents from the settlement as well as to create favorable conditions for life and labor of newcomers.

During the focus groups, Meskhetian Turks who are living in Belgorod region (Dmitrieskiy district) in Russia claim that all of their children of school age (100%) are enrolled in local schools where education is held in Russian. In addition to that, the respondents point out that only 5% of their children get education through distance education at the same time and only about a half of them are trained in Turkish. About 90% of all students are over 16. The distance education is free of charge. None uses commercial distance learning courses.

Children are enrolled in a group of studying Turkish language and culture at: <http://evimturkiye.com/forum/16-2536-1>. The site contains a virtual Turkish keyboard, an online dictionary, a text reference grammar of Turkish language, as well as the facilities, for example, "FAQ" which help users to get more effective training.

Each lesson is accompanied by Turkish practical task to consolidate the theoretical material. Learners are encouraged to make multiple assignments to translate short texts, to memorize words. Students can post the lesson to a teacher at any time. Teachers check the work of each participant, correct mistakes, explain their origin, give advises, respond to questions regarding homework, etc. The lesson contains material and interactive links (they are marked in blue) which must be necessarily opened; otherwise the material will not be fully understood.

In general, all respondents indicate that the most effective distance education methods are the following:

- internal electronic mail is a type of communication which is used only by students of a distance learning course;
- sharing files means sending electronic documents between participants of distance education;
- video service suggests the exchange of visual presentations, conferences and dialogues between the participants of distance education;
- a white board is an online service that allows to view and edit different types of tests and share them during the education process;

- notebook is a personal document which allows students to make personal notes;
- discussion forums are online messaging tools, where questions and answers are grouped according to the thematic structure of a virtual forum;
- chat is synchronous exchange of messages, a dialogue or a discussion inside the group.

In interviews with Meskhetian Turks, living in Belgorod region, respondents praise the possibilities of distance education for the preservation of their ethnic and national culture, especially for the next generations, which is reflected in their statements:

*“He is older, he knows all the rules. He can tell a lot. He lives according to these rules. He can give a wise advice. But each successive young generation have less knowledge and does not observe the traditions of their ancestors. Only those who have gone to Turkey, they have to communicate in Turkish. Although modern Turkey is far from our historical language, it’s very different. There are a lot of Meskhetian Turks, but they are settled all over the world and they do not communicate with each other. It would be great if our children had an opportunity to study our native history and culture through the Internet” (Businessman, Turk-Meskhetian, agricultural industry, man, 45 years old).*

The analysis of the focus groups’ results enabled to highlight the advantages of distance learning, which are mentioned by respondents.

First, migrants tend to come from developing countries for whom ethnic and cultural socialization requires significant financial resources. In this case, distance learning technologies can be arranged at a relatively lower economic cost.

Second, migrants are dispersed over a large area of residence, so distance education can overcome the limitation of access to educational resources regardless the place they live in.

Third, distance education can be used by migrant children as well as their parents.

Fourth, the content of distance learning can be individual, depending on age, previous education, personal interests, etc.

Fifth, distance education can include a range of disciplines and activities specific to particular ethno-cultural groups of migrants (linguistics, religious studies, history, literature, cooking, crafts, etc.).

Sixth, the content of distance education may be a subject of the host countries authorities’ monitoring and thereby exclude the possibility of radicalization of groups of migrants.

Seventh, the Internet provides an opportunity to obtain additional education in their native language and the study of individual courses, the content of which is based on historical and cultural features of the country.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

According to the results of the focus groups, we can make some conclusions. The study showed that the adaptation process of migrants and their children is associated with various difficulties in regard to preserving their ethnic and cultural identity. This situation directly affects migrant children who are assimilated with the host society and lose their native roots. In order to save ethnic and cultural identity of migrants and their children it is necessary to use distance education technologies which allow them to return to their home countries in future and successfully socialize among compatriots.

First of all, from respondents’ opinions it is difficult to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity for migrants and their children. These circumstances directly affect ethnic and cultural identity of the children who assimilate faster with the host society.

Secondly, the respondents believe that distance learning technology can help to save their ethno-cultural identity and when they come back to the home country, they will experience fewer problems with re-socialization and the reintegration into society of compatriots.

Thirdly, according to the focus group participants from Pridnestrovie, only 1.5% of their children use distance education technology as a main education resource. Children are studying at educational institutions of Moldova, Pridnestrovie, Russia, and Romania via Internet. The selection of educational institution depends on the language, which is native to the children.

Fourth, the focus groups with the Meskhetian Turks show that all children of school age are enrolled in local schools and get education in Russian that helps them to firmly integrate into the local community. Simultaneously, 5% of school children are getting education, using distance learning technologies; half of them are studying Turkish as their native language; about 90% of distance learning students are over 16 years of age. The most popular site is <http://evimturkiye.com/forum/16-2536-1>, which provides the opportunity to study Turkish language and culture.

Fifth, the respondents' answers indicate that parents consider saving ethnic and cultural identity of their children as a very important issue. Equally important they view the integration into the local community through enrolling children into local Russian schools.

Sixth, participants consider such distance education technologies as internal e-mail; file sharing; video service; white board; Notebook; forum; chat the most useful and effective.

The local authorities play the clue role in the effective integration of migrants in the host country.

In some regions, there are some facilities such as Russian Language Centre for migrant children (Tomsk, Russia), Center of migrant children's adaptation (Murmansk, Russia), in order to help children to overcome the language barrier, to learn Russian language and culture of the region. All conditions have been created in the Belgorod region for migrants and their children in order to make the adaptation and integration more effective and easy.

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