Blurring of collective identities in the post-Soviet space

Martin Ehala
University of Tartu, Estonia
ehalam@ut.ee

Abstract

The paper focuses on collective identity formation in the post-Soviet space, applying the Sign Theory of Identity, which claims that collective identity is a type of Social Sign, which structure the social world and legitimise the distribution of power and resources. The paper specifies the functional and structural differences between ethnic, ethnic national, civic national, imperial and linguistic identities; outlines the conditions for identity blurring, using the notions of identity density and identity distance; characterises the main paths of identity blurring; and presents an analysis of the collective identity dynamics in the post-Soviet space, based on the case studies in this special issue.

1   Introduction

This paper focuses on the principles of collective identity formation, using the setting of the late Soviet Union and the post-Soviet space as an example. It is a setting which has one particularly powerful ethnic group (Russians) and a large number of other ethnicities with different demographic, economic and cultural strengths in its periphery. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created a number of new societies, often involving status reversal of the major ethnic groups in the successor states. This geopolitical event has had a profound effect on collective identity formation throughout the whole post-Soviet space.

The notion of collective identity has at least two different usages in the literature. In one tradition, collective identity is understood as an individual variable, characterising a person's subjective sense of belonging to a group (Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Work in this framework recognises that collective identification is a multidimensional concept involving several distinct aspects, such as self-categorisation, pride, emotional attachment, sense of interdependence and meaning (Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

In the other tradition, collective identity is understood as a shared collective construct, not a person's identification with a group or even a sum of individual identities. Collective identity "is the image that the community has of itself as a historical and legitimate group" (Landry, Allard and Deveau, 2010:32). In this tradition, collective identity is seen as constructed in the public discourse: in history textbooks, political speeches, the press, linguistic landscapes etc. It is a mental representation shared by the members of a group.

There are accounts that incorporate both understandings of the collective identity concept. For example, David and Bar-Tal (2009) distinguish the micro and macro levels in collective identity, where the micro level pertains to the individual member's categorisation within the group, and the macro level is the identity of the group as a whole, including shared beliefs, attitudes and behavioural patterns. This paper follows this latter understanding.

There may be different collective identities available in any society at any particular time. Some of these identities may be inclusive of each other, and some

may be in competition. Under certain conditions, mixing, appropriation and blurring of these identities may take place. The goal of this paper is to analyse, based on the selected cases of post-Soviet societies presented in this SI and a closely related one (Zabrodskaja and Ehala, 2014), under which conditions and in which ways the collective identities get modified and blurred. In the first section, the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala, 2007) is outlined. In the subsequent sections, the main collective identities associated with societal organisation – ethnic, national, imperial and linguistic – are characterised and illustrated with cases from the post-Soviet space. The final two sections analyse how these identities are layered in society, in which conditions these identities lead to identity blurring and what the likely outcomes of these processes are.

2   Sign theory of identity

According to the Sign Theory of Identity (Ehala, 2007), collective identity functions as a social sign. The general function of social signs is to structure the social world and legitimise the distribution of power and resources between the members of different subgroups in society. On the macro level, collective identity has the dual structure characteristic to all signs: the signal side, i.e. something by which identity is made empirically perceivable, and the meaning side, containing a socially shared set of core values characteristic to this particular collective identity. On the micro side, collective identity is the association that an individual has to a particular collective identity. The association between an individual and the collective identity consists of two links: to the signal side and to the meaning side of identity. Depending on the strength of these links, each particular collective identity has a more or less central position in this person's self-conception (see Figure 1).
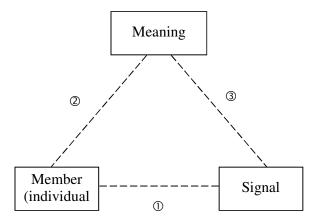

Figure 1. The tripartite structure of collective identity.

On the macro level, collective identity is a shared mental representation of what counts as the signal of a particular identity and what its meaning is. So collective identities are just like human language words, which also have a dual structure: sound (signal) and meaning. For example, by uttering the word *cat,* a person sends the signal /kat/, which is empirically perceivable by other people. The receivers know that this signal represents the meaning of "cat" because they have the same shared representation of the sign *cat* as does the person who has uttered the word.

The signal of a collective identity is a feature (or a set of features) that can be detected from the appearance or behaviour of the group members. It can be

physiological (race), linguistic or engagement in a practice or a discourse. Whichever it is, the signal must be empirically perceivable or else there is nothing that will distinguish the members of a given group from non-members. For example, the collective identity *Estonian* is usually empirically detected if a person reveals a native-level knowledge of the Estonian language. This means that fluent speech in the Estonian language functions similarly in signalling the identity concept "Estonian" as the sound sequence of /kat/ functions in signalling the meaning "cat".

The meaning part of the identity sign consists of the core concepts associated with this identity. For example, ethnic identity consists of what in the ethnosymbolist approach (Smith, 1991) are considered the main attributes of an ethnic group: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more core cultural values (Smolicz, Secombe and Hudson, 2001), a concept of a specific homeland, a common language, and possibly the sense of being chosen for a special destiny.

The connection ③ between the signal and the meaning of the identity (see Figure 1) is what makes the process of signalling collective identity possible. Any empirically detectable feature is insignificant unless it has a particular set of social meanings attached. Once this connection between a feature and a set of meanings is established, it becomes a social sign, similarly to the way in which the connection between sound and meaning is the basis of human language words as signs.

On the micro level, collective identity is the connection between an individual and a collective identity as a social sign. Each individual has or develops a connection both to the signal and to the meaning of a collective identity. For any individual, the process of establishing these connections is the process of self-categorisation (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell, 1987). At the group level, it is the process of group formation.

Connection ① indicates the salience of the identity for the member. Inherited features, such as skin colour, and entrenched features, such as first language, are very salient, cultural practices somewhat less, and arbitrary symbols, such as national colours, are the least salient if not purposefully manifested. The salience can vary in strength among individuals. The more salient the connection to the signal, the more central the particular identity is for an individual (compare *importance* and *behavioural involvement* in Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

Connection ② indicates emotional attachment to collective identity, which is expressed at the level of internalisation of the identity content by the member. The strength of this connection, too, can vary among individuals. The stronger the link to the meaning, the more emotionally attached the member is to this group (compare *attachment* and *affective commitment* in Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

Connections ① and ② need not be of equal strength. There can be individuals whose identity is salient (empirically easily detectable) even though they do not identify strongly with it, and vice versa. Any individual may have several collective identities; for example, one may have an ethnic identity, manifested in the combination of dress, religion and racial features, a linguistic identity associated with a language (different from that of the ethnic heritage language), a national identity, manifested by a little national flag on the car's dashboard etc. All of these identities exist as signs signalling group membership, and any individual has some freedom regarding being associated with any of them. Blurring of identities is a process in which the signals and the meanings of identities get rearranged in several ways and cause the emergence of new signal-meaning pairs, and new associations are formed

between individuals to these emerging social signs. Before I focus on the blurring of identities, I'll discuss various collective identities available and manifested in the case studies presented in this special issue. My focus is on the macro level, i.e. the structure and content of different collective identities; some of the case studies referred to below also contribute to the micro-level analysis.

3   Ethnic identities

Assuming that collective identity is a social sign on the macro level, to define ethnic identity we need to define what count as possible signals and possible meanings for this type of identity.

Cartrite (2003) identifies 12 properties that figure in definitions of ethnic group: common descent, common culture, attachment to a certain territory, a shared language, the collective will to be a group, mutual recognition of group membership, common history, common religion, group symbols, economic ties and existential threat. In social psychology, the definitions of ethnicity have also included such features as cultural norms and values, group strength, salience and subjective meaning (see Zagefka, 2009). Despite the large number of characterising features, according to Reicher and Hopkins (2001) no single feature is either necessary or sufficient to define ethnicity.

If one takes the sign approach to identity, what are definitional for ethnicity are not actual common descent, shared language, home territory etc., but the existence of these concepts in the meaning part of the identity sign. This approach is a close, but more structured version of the ethno-symbolist theory of ethnicity (Smith, 1991), which claims that beliefs in common ancestry, homeland and history are the central defining features for ethnic groups.

The sign approach to identity explains why there are a myriad of properties that characterise ethnic groups, while none of them is definitionally necessary. This is because just one single property is necessary for a collective identity to have the potential to function as an ethnic identity. This one concept is the sense of belonging together historically, through common descent, common history or common fate. The concept of shared history is unavoidable for ethnic identity, since an ethnic group without any shared history is unimaginable.

While the notion of shared history is necessary, it is not sufficient. There are groups who may have a concept of shared history, but which are not considered to be ethnic groups, such as political parties and biker gangs. What distinguishes ethnic groups from all other groups which may have a notion of shared history is the way the group is continued. Ethnic groups use intergenerational transmission of collective identity to secure their continuity; other groups mostly use member conversion. Intergenerational transmission is tightly connected to the notion of descent. Therefore, an ethnic group can be defined as a group which has a collective identity consisting of the concept of shared history and the concept of common descent.

While the concepts of shared history and descent are unavoidable parts of the meaning of ethnic identity, there are other concepts: historical homeland, common language, a specific religion or cultural practice etc. Following Smolicz, Secombe and Hudson, 2001, I'll call the set of these central meanings of identity sign the core values of identity. There may be ethnic groups which have all or most of these concepts present in the meaning of their collective identity, and they are also enacted by the group members. For example, Estonians have a shared sense of history, the concept of Estonia as the homeland, the Estonian language, and some cultural practices, such as *Laulupidu* (a large periodic song festival tradition), as core values.

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The majority of the group members also enact these properties in reality, i.e. they know their history, speak the language, live in Estonia and participate in *Laulupidu* (Song Festival).

However, an ethnic group may exist even without any enactment of the core values. For example, the Poles in Kazakhstan are Poles despite the fact that they do not live in Poland, are not religious and do not speak Polish as their first language (see Zharkynbekova, Aimoldina and Akynova, this issue). This is possible because they have the shared knowledge of the Polish identity as a social sign containing these concepts as core values, and connection ② of emotional attachment to this sign. While this connection may be weak, we can speak of the existence of a Polish minority group in that there exists a part of the population in the Kazakhstani society that shares Polish identity as a social sign.

4 National identities
According to the sign theory of identity, a nation is a group of individuals having the connections ① and ② to a social sign that can be characterised as national. To define national identity, one needs to distinguish what properties this type of collective identity must have.

The understanding of national identity rests heavily on the common and often abused distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism. Although this distinction marks two extreme ends of a continuous scale rather than a binary opposition (see Brubaker, 2004), it still makes sense to outline the properties of prototypical alternatives to define the range. Thus, a civic national identity is one that is "maintained not by calls to blood and land but by vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance to a civil state" (Geerts, 1963:110). Ethnic national identity is not much different from ethnic identity, as it has the concepts of common ancestry, homeland and/or language as the core values in its meaning. Where ethnic national identity seems to differ from ethnic identity is the association to the notion of state, which manifests itself through "common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Smith, 1991:14). This association is best expressed by Guibernau (1996:47-48), who defines nation as "a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself".

Based on Guibernau's definition, the distinctive aspect of national identity seems to be the claim of the nation to the right to rule itself, i.e. the claim of sovereignty. Thus all collective identities that have the concept of sovereignty as one of the core values can be characterised as national. For example, civic national identity has the concept of sovereignty as its defining feature, but may have none or very few other core values, since in extreme cases its members do not share a common ancestry, homeland, language or culture. Ethnic national identity is essentially an ethnic identity which, in addition to ethnic core values, has the core value of sovereignty. Thus the distinction between ethnic and ethnic national identity is the existence of the concept of the group's right to rule itself as one of the core values.

The sign theory of identity makes possible an elegant distinction between what Guibernau (2004:131) calls "nations 'with' and 'without' states". According to her, nations without states are cultural communities, e.g. Catalan, which has many properties of a nation but lacks a state, or nations that have lost their states because of occupation. According to the sign theory of identity, any set of individuals that have

connections ① and ② to a collective identity that has sovereignty as one of its core values constitutes a nation, whether it has its own state or not, or whether it has lost its state and lives scattered in exile. If the concept of sovereignty exists as a core value in the collective identity, the individuals sharing this identity continue to exist as a nation.

For example, the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian nations were born when these ethnic groups imagined the concept of sovereignty as a core value in their collective identities. This happened at some time in the 19th century, when these ethnic groups were living under tsarist rule. They began as nations without states, managed to become nations with states after WWI, became nations without states again just before the WWII, and nations with states again with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

According to this understanding, the collective identity of the Transnistrian people, analysed by Mitrofanova (this issue), also has sovereignty as one of its core values. And as they also militarily successfully defended their sovereignty in the early 1990s, they are a nation with a state, even though this state has no international recognition. Furthermore, if we look at the example of the Sakha (Ventsel, this issue), we see that the Sakha people also have sovereignty as one of their core values. This is not the idea of full sovereignty, since such an idea seems unrealistic given the prevailing geopolitical and demographic situation, but the idea is present, and therefore it is a national identity even if full sovereignty is not conceptualised.

Certainly the distinction between ethnic and ethnic national identity is vague in this framework. A concept of sovereignty may well be formulated by a single poet perhaps a hundred years before anybody actually takes it seriously, but as it gradually becomes a part of a collective identity, the ethnic identity turns into a national identity. What this means is that ethnic national identities are highly saturated with the sovereignty idea, and are interwoven with other core values. Civic national identities, however, are relatively shallow, often having only two core values: territory/state and sovereignty. It is also possible that a civic national identity gradually turns into an ethnic national identity over time and produces the concept of shared history.

5   Imperial identities

Imperial identities do not differ much from national identities; they are one version of national identities. What both national and imperial identities as social signs share is the concept of sovereignty as a core value. Where imperial identity differs from national identity is in having the concept of superiority as one of its core values.

Superiority as a core value need not include the image of aggressive militant superiority, although there are imperial identities which have had this idea very clearly expressed. Rather, the core of the superiority concept is universality, the understanding that this collective identity is the default human condition, and all other possible identities, national or ethnic, are just *cul de sacs* of historical development, perhaps destined to disappear in the future. This sense of superiority is derived from the vast cultural capital that is connected to this identity and available through the language associated with this identity. Thus, the imperial identity has a very rich set of cultural core values which have given rise to its defining core value: superiority.

Imperial identity has a few other properties that distinguish it from national identity. First, imperial identity always has language as one of its core values, unlike ethnic and national identities, which can function without considering language as a core value. For imperial identity, language is the main, and often the only signal of the identity, i.e. speaking the language that is the core value for an imperial identity is

also the main token by which the members of this group are recognised. The tight connection between imperial identity and language is necessary, since language is the essential tool for administration of the empire and the tool of much of the cultural production (literature, science etc.). Therefore, the content of imperial identity is carried by its language and the language is the main token of this identity. The linguistic heritage of several historical empires is clearly seen on the world's linguistic map.

Secondly, the combination of the sense of superiority and language gives rise to the phenomenon of monolingualism, which is a significant characteristic of bearers of an imperial identity. For example, the monolingualism of the Russian-speakers in Kazakhstan is overwhelming despite Russian becoming the minority language in the country after the dissolution of the SU. Even though the Russian-speakers acknowledge the need to learn Kazakh, this is mostly just a rhetorical gesture (see Zharkynbekova, Aimoldina and Akynova, this issue). In the dominant position, the bearers of imperial identity often express outright hostility towards people who use other languages in public spaces, such as in the Sakha case (Ventsel, this issue). In Estonia and Latvia, many Russian-speakers have remained monolingual even though this considerably limits their opportunities in the job market (Zabrodskaja, this issue).

Thirdly, imperial identities differ from national identities in their relationship to territory. While in national identities, the homeland is a core value, in imperial identities, the notion of frontier has a separate value. For example, Mitrofanova (this issue) describes at length how the Transnistrian community formed during the Soviet times precisely as a frontier that attracted individuals from all over the Soviet Union to participate in the industrialisation process of Transnistria. The same process occurred in Kazakhstan, leading to the industrial development of the country and "reclamation to virgin lands" (Zharkynbekova, Aimoldina and Akynova, this issue). After WWII in Estonia and Latvia, a significant number of Russian-speaking immigrants arrived, displaying monolingualism, and attachment to specific Russian ethnic values and the historical homeland. So, in addition to the homeland, the notion of the frontier becomes a core value, i.e. the attitude towards territory has an expansionist connotation which is missing in the content of national identities.

Another way in which imperial communities differ from national communities is that imperial identities are transmitted, to a considerable extent, via the conversion of people from their ethnic or even national identities to an imperial identity. This happens through learning the main token and carrier of the imperial identity: the language. Learning the language occurs first and mainly through pure pragmatic necessity, in order to get access to the resources (financial and intellectual) of the empire. This conversion process is facilitated by the monolingualism of the members of the imperial community and their dislike of the use of other languages in the public space. In this respect, imperial identities are close to religious identities, which are also transmitted via conversion and often involve hostility towards other congregations. The significant extent of Kazakh-Russian bilingualism amongst ethnic Kazakhs, as well as the Sakha-Russian bilingualism amongst ethnic Sakha discussed in this special issue, are clear consequences of such imperial conversion.

6   Linguistic identities

Linguistic identity, in its pure prototypical form, has language as the signal of identity, but no core values attached. Such a situation occurs mainly in the context of a language shift where ethnic identity is retained, but the heritage language has been replaced by a dominant language. For example, many Crimean Tatars who were

deported to Central Asia at the end of WWII lost the Tatar language to the Russian, but rejected the core values of the Russian imperial identity. Such a development is characteristic to situations of forceful assimilation.

On a voluntary basis, the emergence of linguistic identity is particularly likely in imperial situations involving high mobility of an ethnically heterogeneous population to frontier territories. In the Soviet Union, most of the ethnic Soviet republics can be considered to be frontier areas. In this environment, the diverse immigrant population began shifting or had already shifted to the Russian language and began developing or had already developed imperial identity, depending on how completely the heritage ethnic identities were abandoned. This path of linguistic identity development is typical of many Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans who use the Russian language as their first language and have Russian linguistic identity in addition to their ethnic identity (Kosmarskaya 2006; Zharkynbekova, Aimoldina and Akynova, this issue).

Even though linguistic identity may first appear without core values in the process of language shift, it is likely that it will gradually gain the core values associated with the new language, i.e. over time the emotional attachment to the ethnic identity weakens (usually over generations) and a new emotional attachment is formed to the national or imperial identity associated with the new language. Thus, linguistic identity does not remain without content, but converges toward the imperial or national identity associated with the new language.

In some areas, this has also caused a language shift amongst the original population of frontier areas. For example, as discussed in Zharkynbekova, Aimoldina and Akynova (this issue), the Russian language was associated with high culture and civilisation by both the ethnically diverse, but linguistically homogeneous immigrant population and the local ethnic/national groups, such as Kazakhs, Kyrgyzis and Uzbeks. These people acknowledge their ethnic roots, but at the same time have a positive emotional attachment to the core values associated with the Russian language. Kosmarskaya (2006) has characterised this category of people as "the children of empire". In addition, educated Sakha who master Russian at the native level and have some knowledge of the Sakha language are likely to have a Sakha national identity and Russian linguistic identity (Ventsel, this issue).

It is likely that the strength of the imperial component in such a linguistic identity varies over time, depending on political developments. It is likely that in the Soviet time the main emotional attachment was to the imperial identity, while the ethnic roots were only cognitively recognised. The collapse of the SU brought about a sharp status reversal of the titular and Russian-speaking groups in the Baltic states, which made the imperial identity untenable for most of the Russian-speaking population. In Kazakhstan, Russian retained its high prestige and wide usage, most of the symbols of the Soviet Union, such as statues, were left in the cityscape, and the denunciation of the content of the imperial identity was far weaker than in the Baltic countries.

On the other hand, the independence of Kazakhstan affected the identities of Kazakh-Russian bilingual ethnic Kazakhs, whose emotional attachment to Kazakh national core values strengthened, while they seem to have rejected the imperial component altogether. The 2014 crisis in Ukraine also shows that even in the same city a part of the Russian-speaking population can hold to a Russian imperial identity while others have Russian-speaking Ukrainian identity.

Even though linguistic identity is supposed to be a social sign that only has a signal (the language), but a meaning void of core values, in reality totally content-free

social signs do not exist. Any collective identity has some cultural content, and is able to generate new material. As vividly analysed by Mitrofanova (this issue) in the case of Transnistrian identity, even shallow identities are able to appropriate diverse cultural material, leading to a bricolage identity. Perhaps only in the case of a forced language shift (as in the case of Crimean Tatars) will a group develop a linguistic identity that rejects the core values associated with the new language. In most cases, however, the development of linguistic identity is also followed by acculturation and at least partial adoption of the core values associated with the dominant imperial or national language.

7   Identity density and distance

Density is a term from physics that refers to the quantity of something as a unit of measure, for example volume. The higher the density, the more complex and impenetrable the substance. Identity density is a notion that refers to the complexity of the collective identity as a sign, i.e. how much cultural material it contains, both in terms of meaning and signal. As with other substances, the denser the identity the harder it is to mix it with other identities of the same type.

Following the sign theory of identity outlined earlier, the simplest form of collective identity is civic national identity, which in the prototypical case has only two core values: state/country and sovereignty. In its prototypical form, this identity has no signal except the state symbols that everybody can easily display if they wish. Several authors have claimed that the Belarusian identity promoted by the state is closest to the civic national identity prototype in the post-Soviet space (Buhr, Shadurski and Hoffman, 2011; Bekus, 2014).

A slightly denser identity is the linguistic identity that develops as a consequence of language shift to a dominant (imperial or national) language. Linguistic identity can, in principle, be totally without content, i.e. it has no core values. A prototypical case of such a linguistic identity is formed as a result of forceful imperial deportation of individuals with different ethnic backgrounds to a frontier area where they need to use the imperial language to function, although they reject the core values of this identity. The formation of the Russian linguistic identity amongst the deported Tatars in Central Asia seems to be close to the prototypical form of this identity. If a language shift occurs voluntarily, linguistic identity is accompanied by acculturation and at least partial adoption of the core values of this identity.

Ethnic identity is a dense identity, involving several historically entrenched core values, and manifested on the signal side by highly embodied practices, such as language, customs and religion. Because of their richness and high emotional attachment to core values, ethnic identities as signs are relatively durable over time. However, language as a signal of ethnic identity may erode in an unfavourable social environment. This need not bring about the erosion of the ethnic identity altogether. If some emotional significance of core values is retained, a symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990) results. Symbolic ethnicity is a very low density identity. The Polish, Korean and Ukrainian identities in Kazakhstan are good examples of this phenomenon in the post-Soviet space.

Generally, ethnic national identities are even denser than ethnic ones, because the use of state structures in nation building ensures that there is a continuous process of enforcing core values with new cultural material. Imperial identities understandably have the densest structure, due to the vast resources available to create the cultural material needed to sustain their high quality.

Identity distance is a notion that describes the extent to which any two identities share core values and how close these identities are in terms of signals. The distance between the ethnic, ethnic national and imperial identities of the same cultural substance is very small. These identities essentially involve the same social sign, and there are only a few core values that distinguish them. The core value of sovereignty distinguishes between ethnic and ethnic national identities. It is very hard to pinpoint when this core value is present, because it may be totally inhibited on the signal side, i.e. it has no or very little behavioural manifestation. Estonian and Latvian identities during the Soviet time exemplify this well. The Sakha people (Ventsel, this issue) and Lithuanian Poles (Geben and Ramonienė, this issue) certainly have some concept of sovereignty, as their political activity indicates. As even smaller communities worldwide have claimed sovereignty (e.g. Kosovo, Abhasia and Transnistria), the difference between ethnic and ethnic national identities is inherently blurred.

Similarly close are ethnic national identity and the corresponding imperial identity. These two differ only in the core value of superiority and in terms of expansion. Several European nations have had imperial identities, but as they lost their empires they lost the imperial nature of their identity. Whether and to what extent this applies to Russian identity is debatable. There is no doubt that there are members of the Russian-speaking populations in the post-Soviet space who still maintain the imperial identity. The proportion of such individuals may be the highest amongst the population of the Transnistrian Republic, and there are people holding onto imperial identity amongst the Russian-speakers in Ukraine, as the recent developments have shown. As Zabrodskaja (this issue) has showed, such identities are also present amongst a segment of the Russian-speaking populations in Estonia and Latvia, too.

The distance between different versions of the same ethnic or ethnic national identity can be slightly larger, but they are still relatively small. A splendid example of a range of close identities is provided by Mitrofanova (this issue), who has described competing Moldovan identities. All of these identities are variants of social signs that share a number of core values, but differ in some of them. All of them are available in the space of shared social representations, waiting for individuals who wish to develop an emotional attachment to one of these alternatives.

For ethnic Moldovans, who have a significant number of core values that all of these identity versions share, it is relatively easy for them to choose any of them, depending on the general public support each of them enjoys. However, for members of other ethnic or linguistic groups, association with any version of this ethnic national identity is difficult, because it would imply abandoning a whole set of existing core values and adopting new ones.

8   Blurring of identities
Identity density and distance directly affect the process of identity blurring. The most likely to occur is blurring between identities that have low density and small distance. Blurring is less likely where the identities have small distance and high density, or large distance and low density; identities that have high density and large distance are unlikely to blur.

The blurring of identities is possible because collective identities are socially shared signs, similar to human language words. Meanings, connotations and the phonetic shape of words constantly evolve as they are used by a speech community.

The same happens with identities as social signs as their content and manifestations are negotiated.

Blurring between low density identities can occur in all directions. A linguistic identity can become more ethnic over time when the community experiences a common fate, and develops common cultural practices that can become core values. Blurring the border between linguistic and ethnic identities can be seen in the case of Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia (Zabrodskaja, this issue). Blurring the boundary between civic national identity and ethnic (national) identity can be seen in the case of the Transnistrian community, which has its own concept of origin, shared historical memories (war) and a set of cultural core values (Mitrofanova, this issue). Similarly, an eroding ethnic identity can become blurred with a linguistic identity, as in the cases of the Sakha people (Ventsel, this issue) and the Russian-speaking ethnic Kazakhs. A linguistic identity may in turn develop into a civic national identity, as seems to have happeneḋ to the Russian-speaking ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan after the country became independent (Zharkynbekova, Aimoldina and Akynova, this issue; see also Kosmarskaya, 2014).

When a linguistic identity or a civic identity becomes blurred with an ethnic identity, this is a diachronic development in which these identities develop richer sets of core values and signals, as well as stronger emotional attachment to these identities. In the case of an ethnic identity evolving into a linguistic or civic identity, two collective identities are involved, i.e. a person has connections ① and ② to two different identities as social signs: the heritage ethnic one and the new linguistic or civic one. In principle, over generations an eroding ethnic identity can develop into a new ethnic one via a linguistic or civic identity. Since there is a developmental path between these three types of identities, boundaries between them may become blurred under certain diverse social conditions.

As many of the examples indicate, the blurring of identities can be rather common. However, this doesn't always occur. Some identities do not blur that easily. For example, the Estonian ethnic national identity has several historically entrenched core values which are also signalled empirically, mainly through the native-like level of Estonian knowledge. This identity is very dense and fairly hard to attain, as it requires a good knowledge of language and accepting a set of core values that are very distant from the core values associated with versions of Russian-speaking identities.

Imperial identities are even denser. Often they do not blur even after status reversal and in diaspora situations. As an emigrant Russian-speaking ethnic German in Germany expressed it: "*The Russian person is not a patriot of a fixed place or a piece of land. He feels good where he is, and where he has a wish to succeed. His cultural space – the habits, rituals and traditions which he identifies himself with - he always carry with him, in his home, in his soul, etc.*" (Bagreeva and Mendzheritskiy, this issue:10). Ethnic national identities are durable too, easily surviving half a century of oppression, as the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian cases show. Ethnic identities are slightly more prone to erosion, particularly if the set of core values is shallow. This is particularly clearly seen in the case of small ethnic border communities. As the Lithuanian Poles show, such communities have a high propensity to multilingualism, shifting their identities when state borders are redrawn (Geben and Ramonienė, this issue). This can be seen as a kind of identity mimicry that safeguards against possible persecution by the state, while still retaining some of the crucial core values of ethnicity.

Civic identity is the least dense, of course, but one must not forget that over time there may be a saturation of any identity, leading to what can be called ethnogenesis. Both civic and linguistic identities, when their sets of core values and members' emotional attachment to them increase, may become increasingly more ethnic, as can be seen in the cases of Transnistrians and Russian-speakers in Estonia.

9 Conclusion

This paper has presented an analysis of the collective identity situation in the post-Soviet space based on the case studies that will follow in this special issue. This analysis has outlined the crucial features that distinguish ethnic and different types of national, imperial and linguistic identities, has examined the conditions that inhibit or enhance the processes of convergence between identities, and has focussed on the blurring of identities, using the sign theory of identity as a guiding framework. It has described some of the regularities, but by no means all the richness of data or analytical insights presented in these case studies. Reality is always richer than any accounts meant to systematise it. Furthermore, the generalisations presented here are based on the analysis of one particular post-colonial setting, and therefore may easily misrepresent the features characteristic to this setting as being universal. Hopefully, the presentation of the argument has been detailed and clear enough so that specialists in other post-colonial settings can fruitfully modify and complement the generalisations.

About the author

Martin Ehala is a Professor of Literacy Education at the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics of the University of Tartu in Estonia. His main research interests are the development of the Estonian linguistic environment, language maintenance and ethnolinguistic vitality. Currently, he is the head of the project "Sustainability of Estonian in the Era of Globalisation" (EKKAM), which aims to develop a systemic interdisciplinary approach to language ecology on the example of the development of Estonian. He has also published extensively on topics related to language and identity, and contact-induced changes in Estonian.

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