Formation of territorial collective identities: turning history into emotion

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Formation of territorial collective identities: turning history into emotion

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This paper provides a broad comparative summary of all the cases addressed in the Special Issue 'Hot and cold ethnicities in post-Soviet space'. The aim of the summary is to pinpoint the major features that have an impact on the ethnic temperatures in the social settings studied. This paper argues that ethnic, national, civic and imperial groups are representatives of the same type (territorial groups) and the collective identity formation which for all of them is principally similar. As the case studies indicate historical narratives and collective memory are invariably used for the formation of the emotional attachment to collective identity. The case studies provide support to an understanding that any territorial group is a project rather than a thing and resulting groupness is a happening which needs continuous enactment to sustain its state.

Keywords: collective identity formation; emotional attachment; post-Soviet societies

Introduction

The goal of the current special issue (SI) has been to explore the concept of hot and cold ethnicities using cases from post-Soviet societies, the processes of ethnic temperature change and its effects on interethnic relations in the societies of newly emerged nation-states. While the research question was formulated in ethnic terms (Ehala 2011; Zabrodskaja and Ehala forthcoming), the papers in this SI have focused on very different groups and collective identities: ethnic minority (e.g. Polish, Latgalians), ethno-confessional minority (Jews), quasi-ethnic (the Russian speakers of Estonia and Latvia), ethnic national (Estonian, Lithuanian), civic national (Belarus), communitarian (urban Central Asians) and imperial (de-ethnicised Russians).

As people belong simultaneously to various groups, they do not have one exclusive collective identity, but rather a whole array of possible collective identities. These multiple identities are organised on various dimensions. Typical dimensions of collective identity are gender, race, ethnicity, age, language, religion, profession etc. Each of these dimensions allows a certain number of distinct categories. For example, gender identity usually has two categories, racial identity has considerably more and ethnicity even more. Prototypically, the identity which characterises a person on one particular dimension is exclusive, i.e. one is male or female, rarely both, black or white or something else, and so on.

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A comparative look at the cases in this SI reveals that all the collective identities discussed relate to each other as if they were alternatives on the same dimension: one could prefer either Belorussian civic or Belorussian ethnic collective identity (Bekus forthcoming), ethnic or urban Kyrgyz affiliation, ethnic Russian or de-ethnizised imperial affiliation (Kosmarskaya forthcoming), but rarely both. If these non-ethnic collective identities are alternative to each other and to ethnic identity, all of them are of the same type, and therefore a generalisation can be sought that could explain why these identities seem to be categories on the same dimension, and if this is so, what are the causes of their differences and how these differences relate to the sense of emotional attachment to the collective identity which underlies the metaphor of hot and cold ethnicities.

In this concluding paper, I will argue that all collective identities discussed in this SI are functionally equivalent and therefore representatives of one general type clearly distinguishable from all other types of social groups. I will call these groups territorial groups. This generalisation enables us to see that the differences of emotional attachment that they are able to induce from their members are partly due to the historical depth of their existence, and partly due to different perspectives on history.

Based on this hypothesis, this paper provides a broad comparative summary of all the cases addressed in the SI. The aim of the summary is to pinpoint the major features that have an impact on the ethnic temperatures in the social settings studied. One of the most frequent findings in the case studies has been the importance of historical background for the formation of hot ethnic attitudes. This implies the importance of collective memory for the formation of the emotional attachment to collective identity and its impact on the ethnic temperature.

Traditionally, the term *ethnolinguistic* has restricted the focus of the theory to linguistic and ethnic minority groups, the mainstream society is usually just viewed as the environment where the group whose vitality is addressed exists. Such an understanding forces a distinction between ethnolinguistic groups and groups and identities which are not strictly ethnic, for example, Belarusians, urbanised Central Asians and the 'children of empire'. As I will argue, the theory of ethnolinguistic vitality would benefit if it could treat ethnic, national, civic and imperial groups as representatives of the same type and the collective identity formation for all of them as principally similar.

Territorial groups

The term *territorial groups* is borrowed from Guibernau (2004) who uses it in the definition of 'nations without states' which are 'those territorial communities with their own identity and a desire for self-determination included within the boundaries of one or more states, with which, by and large, they do not identify'. The notion of a nation without a state makes the continuum from ethnic minorities, to ethnic and civic nations and even to imperial nations clearly visible, by specifying the central property that all these groups share – they all can function as human societies; and because of this property, they are functionally equivalent. The main functional goal for any society is to provide physical and cultural security (Berezin 2002).

Since territorial groups are functionally equivalent, they share other important features. First, territory is a necessary condition for every human society, and therefore every group of this type has an association with a territory where their members reside, and/or has a shared concept of (historic) homeland. Second, language is a necessary tool for any society to function, and thus it is not surprising that it becomes the main token of a territorial group. Even if the same language is also used by some other territorial

groups, dialectal differences emerge which correspond to territorial spread and function as indices to the territory where the group resides. Thus, a distinct language variety characterises first and foremost a territorial community. Third, the formation of territorial groups is universal. Living in a form of society is the basic way of operation of human species. Forming a society is a territorial phenomenon and as it involves interaction and temporal continuity, it will start to produce cultural material that can work as a basis of formation of a collective identity. Therefore, the emergence of territorial groups with their distinct collective identities is a universal property of social functioning, they are omnipresent, they are substances that the social world is made of and despite the fact that they are socially constructed, there is no way how they could be disposed in principle.

Certainly, some territorial groups are merged or dissolved in the continuous process of group (re)formation; and different territorial identities may involve different fractions of the society, so that sometimes there are several competing identities around. But if we see the emergence of territorial groups as ongoing process of identity formation that makes the society more coherent, nevertheless this process is functionally directed towards creation of a set of shared values and emotional attachment to the group affiliation. If it fails this, the identity project collapses by being broken down to these smaller territorial groups which it aims to incorporate, or losing its members to a more attractive territorial group. The hypothesis behind the concept of hot and cold ethnicities is that one of the most powerful social psychological factors affecting this process is the members' sense of emotional attachment to their collective identity. The cases in this SI clearly provide support to this view.

The role of history in collective identity formation

The comparative analysis of the cases presented in this SI points to recurrent patterns of intergroup attitudes correlating to different degrees of ethnic temperatures. These features are not fully independent on each other, but mutually reinforcing in several ways. As the analysis will show, the nature of historical narratives in the collective memory seems to be one of the main factors that affects the emotional attachment to collective identity and to the nature of intergroup relations in general.

This regularity is summarised in Figure 1. In the top row, the social settings studied are presented in an abbreviated way: R in the left side in the setting abbreviation stands for the Russian speaking minority, R in the right hand in *Jewish - R* setting represents the national majority in Russia. The rest of the abbreviations stand for Bel(arusian), Ukr (ainian), Cent(ral) Asian, Li(thuanian), Est(onian) and La(tvian) ethic/national groups. The dark grey indicates highest presence of the feature, light grey a partial presence and white the weakest presence or absence of the feature. The greyscale is relative, reflecting just the differences between the cases in this set, not absolute values.

The first three features in the figure follow from the principles of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979): the perceived stability expresses the general belief of whether there are realistic alternatives to the existing intergroup power relations; legitimacy expresses the consensus amongst the majority and minority group members whether the existing power and status differences between the groups are legitimate; and the boundary permeability indicates whether it is possible socially to move from one group to the other, mainly from the lower status group to the higher status group.

However, the status issue is not clear-cut for all cases studied. In all settings, the titular languages have official status in the setting and so, in principle the titular groups

	R - Bel	R - Ukr	R - CentAsian	R - Li	Po - Li	Jewish - R	R- Est	R- La
Perceived stability								
Legitimacy								
Boundary permeability								
Minority prestige								
Dialect continuum								
Conflicting memories								
Ethnic temperature								

Figure 1.   Factors related to intergroup processes.

should be regarded as high status groups. Still, Russian language and culture enjoy a considerable prestige (feature *Minority prestige* in Figure 1) in Belarus, Ukraine and in Central Asian republics, and Russian language has some form of official recognition there, too. Therefore, it is not very clear that we have any significant status differences in these cases in regard to the titular and Russian-speaking groups.

This means that in Belarus, Ukraine and the Central Asian countries studied, boundary permeability might mean the possibility and at least some tendency to affiliate to the Russian-speaking community. In the case of Belarus and Ukraine, the picture is even further blurred by the linguistic and cultural closeness of these groups to the Russian language and culture (feature *Dialect continuum*), so that it is fairly effortless to switch from one to the other identity, as the interview data presented by Polese (forthcoming) indicate that members of the same family can easily chose different ethnolinguistic identities.

In the rest of the cases, the official mainstream identities have clearly higher status than the minorities, and thus, the boundary permeability would mean the possibility to move from the minority to the majority group. Even though the boundaries are in no cases so rigid as to prevent any shift of the group membership, as Ehala and Zabrodskaja (forthcoming) show, in Latvia and Estonia, there is little shift from the minority to the majority groups, and majorities are not eager to accept shifting minority members, either. In Lithuania, Russian speakers are shifting and being accepted easily, but not Polish speakers. According to Nosenko-Stein (forthcoming), banal anti-semitism makes it difficult to the Jewish, too, to assimilate to the mainstream which is particularly vividly expressed in the identity type of Negative Jew.

A strong recurring factor that influences the intergroup relations and the possible identity processes is the collective memory: as all papers in this volume indicate, the historical background is extremely important in understanding the character of the attitudes towards out-groups: where the historical narratives of the majority and minority are compatible, the interethnic processes are more or less harmonic, where the narratives contain conflicting interpretations and assessment of the same historic events, the intergroup relations are tenser. For example, in Belarus, Ukraine and Central Asian republics, the legacy of the Soviet period is assessed similarly by the minorities and majorities: Stalinist repressions are commemorated, the victory of the Great Patriotic War celebrated and the economic advancements of the soviet period positively recognised. These societies are characterised by less salient ethnic divisions.

Also in Lithuania, it seems that the soviet past is mainly seen in a positive nostalgic light, and identity building is not based on commemorations that strongly conflict with the identity narratives in Russia. At the same time, the situation is different with Poles – the long dispute with Poland over the Vilnius is clearly based on conflicting interpretations of history and so it makes it more difficult for Lithuanians to accept Poles as in-group members even if the local Poles seem to accept the Lithuanian viewpoint about history (see Ehala and Zabrodskaja forthcoming). Quite similar is the collective memory situation in the case of Russian Jews – the long-lasting suspicion from the side of the majority and the experience about being discriminated against is a factor that sustains the Jewish identity by making it harder to shift to the mainstream identity and to be accepted as a full member (Nosenko-Stein forthcoming).

In Estonia and Latvia, the identity work is based very clearly on conflicting interpretations of the twentieth-century history, particularly over the nature of the Second World War (see Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008; Ehala 2009). The whole Soviet period is seen as a social rupture of the normal national development (Jõesalu and Kõresaar 2013), and similarly the breakup of the Soviet Union is perceived as rupture by the Russian-speaking communities. Both the titular and Russian-speaking ethnicities have a significant sense of existential threat, too. As identities are being built on conflicting historical narratives, these ethnic communities are hotter and have more rigid interethnic boundaries than the rest of the cases in the set.

Conflicting narratives are also the main source for the perception of illegitimacy of the current intergroup situations by the minorities. In this set, these perceptions are the strongest amongst the Russian-speaking communities in Latvia and Estonia, and may be present also amongst the Jews and Poles, but considerably lesser extent. In the rest of the cases, interethnic relations are broadly seen as legitimate: in Lithuania, there is no legitimacy issues between Russians and Lithuanians, one of the reasons being that all residents of Lithuania were granted Lithuanian citizenship automatically when the Soviet Union collapsed, unlike in Latvia and Estonia. In Belarus, Ukraine and the Central Asian countries studied, the high informal and official status of Russian language provides good grounds for the Russian speakers to consider the situation legitimate, and if there are perceptions of illegitimacy they may be present amongst the ethnically hot subgroups amongst the titular ethnicities (Kosmarskaya forthcoming; Bekus forthcoming).

Returning to the feature *perceived stability* in Figure 1, it expresses not only the perceived strength of the minority, but its combination with the perception of legitimacy – i.e. whether the minority feels strong enough to challenge the existing intergroup power relations, and has also a strong sense of injustice to feel motivated to change the situation (for discussion of the concept of perceived stability, see Ehala and Zabrodskaja 2011). As the studies in this volume indicate, there is no widely spread motivation to challenge the situation in Belarus, Ukraine, the Central Asian Republics studied, Lithuania, and in Russia in respect of Jews, either because the situation is perceived legitimate enough by minorities or the they are just too weak to be able to see a possibility for a change. The situation is different in Estonia and Latvia where the perception of illegitimacy, conflicting narratives of history and the relative perceived deprivation by the Russian speakers (Kus, Liu, and Ward 2013) in one hand, and the relative strength of the Russian-speaking communities on the other hand contribute towards the perception of instability.

The last row in the Figure 1 presents the assessment of ethnic temperature (white – cold, grey – hot). The row above the last one gives indication as about the possible causes of higher ethnic temperature. The strongest causal effect seems to come from the collective memory: in societies where the historical narratives are conflicting and contain

experiences of intergroup conflict, discrimination and distrust, the interethnic boundaries are less permeable, the status of minorities and the perceptions of legitimacy lower (Ehala and Zabrodskaja forthcoming). In societies where the collective memories of ethnicities are not directly conflicting to each other, ethnic temperatures are lower. Certainly, the content of historical memory is socially constructed and therefore only partly determined by actual historical events (Smith 1999). This means that the ethnic temperature differences in the societies studied are not predetermined or fully explainable by different historical fates, but require a more nuanced theoretical analysis. Explicating the mechanism how historic and cultural material is used to influence the ethnic temperature is an important precursor for understanding how ethnolinguistic vitality changes over time.

Turning history to emotional attachment

The role of emotions and cultural particulars associated with collective identity have been understudied in the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality, abut also in social psychology and political psychology. For example, the Social Identity Theory envisages that if the given social identity does not provide material for a positive self-esteem, individuals assess the situation and engage in one of three strategies: social mobility, social creativity or social competition. This process is overwhelmingly seen as a rational choice game, based on the assessment of the situation. The role of emotional attachment, though recognised, has not been studied much in the EVT or SIT in general.

As summarised in Figure 1, the single and most powerful factor that shapes ethnic temperatures and the emotional attachment is the content of collective memory. The material in the collective memory is formed in the course of history. Although real history is one and fixed, the course of events is perceived differently by different participants, and as there is no universal neutral observer, the descriptions of history are all partial, reflecting the viewpoint of the narrator. This fact has direct consequence to the formation of collective memory. Collective memory is not a whole that is formed uniformly in the group, but it takes place in different settings like families, school, work places etc., in different forms like literature, theatre, film, art, rituals; it can be forged by different types of institutions both bottom-up and top-down nature, and it is actively negotiated (see Misztal 2003).

Although the sense of common history is often coupled with a belief in common ancestry, this is not necessary. For example, the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia do not have a common ancestry, but still have a shared sense of history and collective memory. The latter draws its most powerful emotional forces from the period of the Soviet Union, not that much from the folkloristic material of ethnic Russianness. Still, these groups function in identity-wise similarly as 'proper' ethnic groups characterised by longer history, a common ancestry and heritage language.

Furthermore, even the collective identity of urban Central Asians that unites Russian speakers and Russian-oriented titulars with urban lifestyle (see Kosmarskaya forthcoming) is the identity of a territorial group that has some common cultural stuff that supports emotional attachment to this identity (connected to consumer values, Europeanness and again the historical material from the Soviet period). Even though this cultural material may be shallow in comparison with 'proper' ethnic identities due to a short period of its historical presence, it fulfils functionally the same purposes. In Belarus, we see the formation of a collective identity that aims to embrace all people living in Belarus notwithstanding their ethnic affiliations. Still, this identity, even though it is cold, has some cultural material, mainly drawn from the period of the Soviet Union that the members share and which can

be used for creating emotional attachment. This variant of Belarus identity is not ethnic, but it is aimed to achieve the same level of solidarity, cohesiveness and emotional significance as we see in the case of old type of ethnicities. Therefore, all these cases indicate the same processes of emergence of territorial groups and corresponding collective identities be they ethnic, national, civic or imperial.

Territorial group as a process

Analysing the cases in this SI, there are groups with different ethnic temperature present. Some of them are as hot as the main ethnicities in the Baltic countries, some are diffused and cold as in the case of Ukraine and Belarus, and may be in the early stages of emergence as the urban Central Asians. Kosmarskaya (forthcoming) also mentions the Russian-speaking 'children of the empire', who had a lower sense of ethnic affiliation and a broader affiliation to the state and modern lifestyles. Even the imperial identity is in its essence the collective identity of a territorial group, even if the territory is very large and the imperial group is a tiny yet powerful minority in this territory. Still the 'children of empire' had a sense of shared history, territory, values and other cultural particulars that create emotional attachment to a collective identity.

One may argue that such a small minority of the population cannot claim to represent a truly imperial nation in any way similar to that of ethnic groups or nation-state nations. This raises the famous question of 'When is a nation?' by Walker Connor (1994), i.e. at which point we can talk about a territorial group as a distinctive collective entity with its own collective identity. Surely, there is no answer to the question when a territorial group is formed and ready, they always face the challenge of incorporating new members, either newly arrived migrants or members of ethnic minorities who still have their heritage territorial identity prevailing over the larger one. This gives support to an understanding that any territorial group is a project rather than thing (Berezin 2002) and resulting groupness is an event, something that happens (Brubaker 2004) rather than a substance. In this perspective, even 'proper' ethnic groups are projects not entities, although some of them have been very successful and have managed emotionally to tie an overwhelming majority in a certain territory. But identity formation may also be less successful, like ethnic Belarusianness which is a project struggling over the loyalty of the population against the civic type of affiliation promoted by Belarusian authorities.

The conclusion here is that there are always different elites who act to call a territorial group to being and often these different group formation processes are in competition. Imperial elites work for creating emotional attachment to imperial identity, ethnic elites to national or ethnic identity urban elites for their urban identity and so on. Even though some of these projects seem to be overarching existing ethnic affiliations, what they are aiming at is a functionally similar project than ethnicity. They are just in a very beginning of this process. If they succeed, a group and corresponding collective identity emerges which is functionally similar to what we know as ethnic.

Therefore, one can say that the formation of a territorial group is a project that aims to align a concept of territory with that of corresponding identity and language, by creating necessary language competencies and emotional attachment. As emotional attachment is created communicatively it requires a shared language to emerge. Emotional attachment is created by using historical material that is associated with social values. In a given territory there could be several parallel projects of territorial group generation, some of which are not necessarily exclusive, if they can be conceptualised in a subgroup relationship. What is ultimately a matter of competition is the locus of the strongest

emotional attachment. This territorial group project that has the richest historical material that all of potential members can emotionally relate to and knows how to present this material in the public discourse attractively, succeeds to acquire the strongest emotional attachment amongst the largest segment of the population in a given territory.

Conclusion

The papers in this SI have described in detail several intergroup settings in the area of the former Soviet Union, focusing particularly to the sense of emotional attachment that could be conceptualised as ethnic temperature. The analysis reveals that the sense of emotional attachment is in a strong correlation with the type of historical narratives that are organised into a coherent ideological frame in the collective identity of the groups in contact. Where the historical narratives of groups in contact are compatible, ethnic temperature is low, where they are in contradiction to each other in assessing the historic legacy, ethnic temperatures are higher. The reliance on historical narratives in creating collective memory and its connectedness to emotional attachment seems to characterise all groups analysed in the papers, even if the common history for some groups do not exceed half a century.

This indicates that the mechanism of using history in collective identity development is not a particular that characterises only ethnic groups, but a general regularity common to all territorial groups. Therefore, all territorial groups are of the same type as ethnic groups, the greatest difference being that the historical process of their formation has been significantly shorter than that of the 'proper' ethnic groups. But if they turn up to be successful, they are likely to develop a similar depth of historic, linguistic and cultural embeddedness as ethnic groups.

The SI also gave evidence that in all of the cases, there are several territorial groups being forged and formed in the same territory. Most of these groups compete over the emotional attachment of the members of the same population – Belarus being perhaps the most vivid case of competing ethnic and civic identities. This yields to an understanding that any territorial group is at the same time an entity and the process of creating this entity. As the cases in this SI indicate, the ethnogenetic processes are omnipresent, and even if some ethnicities weaken, some other are being born at the same time. Therefore, while the collective identities are 'just constructed' and any of them can be in principle deconstructed or disposed, the result of such process is not a society without a collective identity, but just a different collective identity that is functionally similar to that which it has replaced.

Funding

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