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## Inter-ethnic processes in post-Soviet space: theoretical background

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This introductory article of a special issue outlines the general theoretical background, formulates principles for a continuum of hot and cold ethnicities, gives a brief characterisation of the interethnic developments after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and provides an overview of the papers. This collection of contributions deals with a variety of case studies with a particular focus on the strength of members' emotional attachment to their group. Such a division of ethnicities can be categorised into two prototypes: 'hot' and 'cold'. A 'hot' ethnic group is one whose members have a high emotional attachment to their group. 'Cold' ethnic groups are those whose members' emotional attachment to the groups is low, absent or latent.

**Keywords:** inter-ethnic processes; post-Soviet; collective identity; ethnolinguistic vitality; nation-building

### Rationale for the current special issue

This special issue on 'Hot and cold ethnicities in post-Soviet space' is the outcome of an academic dialogue that began with a conference organised by Martin Ehala and Anastassia Zabrodskaia in Tallinn in 2011. The purposes of the conference were to explore the issues of hot and cold ethnicities (see Ehala 2011) and to examine the phenomenon of ethnic temperature as the key factor in group vitality, as well as the processes of 'temperature change' and their effects on inter-ethnic relations in society. This special issue synthesises the insights from the conference and offers proposals for further analysis.

The collapse of the Soviet Union created a number of new nation-states and a number of Russian-speaking minority communities within their borders. As compared to the Soviet time, the breakdown intensified inter-ethnic processes, which resulted in a discursive 'reinterpretation of the history of the Soviet Union' (Blommaert 2006, 151) and efforts to undo Russification (Pavlenko 2009). The everyday linguistic practices and the (re)negotiation of identities among new titular and minority groups during the transformation of the post-Soviet urban sociocultural-linguistic environment have attracted scholarly interest 'as a contested linguistic space, where emotional exchanges over language-related issues are fodder for the daily news' (Pavlenko 2008, 275).

There have been multiple social changes since the breakup of the USSR in 1991 related to the de facto and de jure status of the Russian language and the challenges faced by competing and coexisting national ideologies. Two main results have been the massive

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outflow of Russian-speakers from the new national republics during the 1990s and efforts to recognise, revitalise and institutionalise the new national languages in order to avoid the continued dominance of the formerly universal Russian language. A radical shift in language policy can provoke a clash of old and new language ideologies, resulting in the confrontation of ‘the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests’ (Irvine 1989, 255). Therefore, the post-Soviet interethnic space is an interesting site to study changes in interethnic relationships and their impact on ethnolinguistic vitality.

The shared historical experience makes the post-Soviet ethnicities easily comparable, although they also have important differences (for example, Estonia and Latvia and their national histories are not comparable to other Soviet Republics, such as Ukraine and Lithuania, which already had ancient traditions of statehood, while places like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan only developed statehood with the help of the Soviets, or Belarus, which started its history as an independent state only after the collapse of the USSR). Both the similarities and differences make it possible to examine comparatively the factors that contribute to ethnic temperature change for a better understanding of the interaction of different causal forces in different combinations.

## **Conceptual background**

### ***Ethnolinguistic vitality***

Traditionally, ethnolinguistic vitality is understood as a group’s ability to act as a distinctive collective entity in intergroup settings (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977, 308). It is generally understood that the higher the vitality, the better the chances are for the maintenance of this group over time, and the lower the vitality, the more likely it is to cease to exist through assimilation. Thus, the maintenance or assimilation of a group is seen as dependent on its ability to function as a collective. Traditionally, vitality has been divided into objective (demographic, and macro-level structural factors) and subjective vitality (group members’ attitudes), but it has been argued recently (see Ehala 2010) that a group’s ability to act as a collective is entirely a social psychological phenomenon, which means that ethnolinguistic vitality is more or less what traditionally was called subjective vitality, and objective vitality is better understood as the strength of a group. If understood in this narrower social psychological sense, ethnolinguistic vitality is dependent on the closeness of the identification of the members to their ethnic group (Giles and Johnson 1987; Ehala 2011). In this understanding, a group’s ability to act collectively depends on the strength of its members’ identification with their in-group.

The theory of ethnolinguistic vitality is not the only theory that addresses the question of what helps groups to maintain their groupness and remain sustainable over time, and why some groups are durable while others lose members and dissolve. These or closely related questions are also explained in the theory of social identity (Brown 2000), collectivism–individualism (Triandis and Gelfand 1998), studies of nationalism (Bar-Tal 1993), etc. Different theories analyse the group identification issue quite differently. As Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) show in their comprehensive meta-analysis of studies on collective identity, at least seven facets of collective identification (self-categorisation, evaluation, importance, attachment and sense of interdependence, social embeddedness, behavioural involvement, and content and meaning) have been repeatedly distinguished in research. On the other hand, Roccas et al. (2008) propose four modes of identification: importance, commitment, superiority and deference. As there is no consensus on the exact number and nature of different aspects of collective

identification, we, instead of trying to select, opt for a generalisation and group these facets into three broad types of factors: cognitive (self-categorisation, content and meaning, evaluation, importance and superiority), emotional (attachment and sense of interdependence, commitment and deference) and behavioural (social embeddedness, behavioural involvement, commitment and deference).

Based on the above tripartite division, it is likely that what manifests as ethnolinguistic vitality on the group level is mainly due to the behavioural facet of identification with the in-group on the individual level: the more the members are socially embedded, the more they defer to the group, and the more committedly they are involved in the group's actions, the more vital this group is. As an individual's decision behaviourally to contribute to the group could be motivated both by cognitive and emotional arguments, it is also likely that the behavioural facet of group identification is motivated by the cognitive and emotional side of identification, but for each individual, the combination of rational and emotional motivation could be different.

The rational and emotional motivation to commit to the group leads to different types of commitment. Rational motivation is based on the calculation of benefits and costs that are associated with commitment or with abstention from commitment. Therefore, in the case of rationally motivated commitment, the individual is motivated to contribute to the collective action to the extent that the possible benefit that comes from participation exceeds the risks and costs or, alternatively, to the extent that punishment from free-riding is more costly than the risks and costs associated with participation. This means that only groups that have a well-established benefit and sanction system can achieve ethnolinguistic vitality purely by relying on group members' rational motivation to cooperate and contribute to the group goals. Groups with scarce resources and limited ability to sanction free-riders have little chance rationally to motivate their members (except for promising prosperity in the case of victory: which is why the promise of land and/or equal opportunities has proven to be so effective in motivating oppressed ethnicities to demand freedom). In most cases, rational motivation is also supported by emotional factors that seem to be far more powerful than rational calculation: there have always been plenty of people willing to risk their lives for causes, groups, gods or leaders to whom they are emotionally strongly attached.

These considerations have led Ehala (2011) to propose that, based on the prevailing type of identification with the in-group, ethnicities can be grouped into two prototypes: 'hot' and 'cold'. Hot groups have a high share of members who have high emotional attachment to the group. Cold ethnicities are those whose members' emotional attachment to the group is absent, low or latent. These groups function as collective entities purely on rational grounds. Ehala (2011) hypothesised that for ethnicities of equal size, hot ones are more vital and sustainable than cold ones.

### ***Cold ethnicities***

Ethnicities whose members do not feel significant emotional attachment to their group can be considered cold. In general, there are two likely causes for the coldness. In one case, the group does not face internal or external threats; there are no prominent out-groups, the presence of which could strengthen self-categorisation on ethnic grounds. Due to the lack of a significant (and threatening) 'other', the ethnic collective identity has a very low salience – the members of these groups see themselves primarily as merely people, not representatives of an ethnicity. It does not matter whether the group is a large and wealthy monocultural nation living in peace with its neighbours or a small tribe

living in significant isolation: in both cases, the members do not have much reason to categorise themselves on ethnic grounds or to feel any particular emotional attachment to this identity. This type of cold group can operate on rational grounds because of the lack of prominent out-groups, there is no drag towards other possibly more rewarding group memberships.

In the other case, the group is cold because it is weak in comparison with the out-groups, often geographically dispersed within the majority out-group. Such groups are usually characterised by a lack of leadership, few cultural activities or little sense of a shared history, i.e. there is no significant 'nation-building' to increase the feeling of unity and emotional significance of this identity for the individuals who could claim it. Some of the threatened minority communities are cold for this reason.

The ethnolinguistic vitality of cold groups is sustained by social institutions, which provide resources and sanctions, and thus motivate the group members to contribute to the continued functioning of the groups. As a rule, the more economically, politically, culturally and militarily powerful the group is, the easier it is to motivate its members for collectively coordinated behaviour purely on rational grounds. For this reason, economically self-sustainable, non-threatened, broadly monocultural societies remain vital even without any need for strong emotional attachment of the members to the group identity. The situation is different in the case of weak ethnicities that do not have the means to provide a system of benefits and sanctions to their members. There is very little rational reason why the members of these groups should contribute to the group or even why they should be loyal to this low prestige identity if some alternative ethnic affiliation can provide better living conditions and higher collective self-esteem. So a weak ethnicity is threatened and may go through language and identity shift if it is operating only on rational motivation.

### ***Hot ethnicities***

In the hot mode of operation, the group members' emotional attachment to their group is high. Emotional attachment is created routinely through the socialisation of young generations in a family and educational system and discursively in the society by the alignment of collective emotions (see Thomas, McGarty, and Mavor 2009). The cultural material (narratives, stereotypes, etc.) that is used in this process depends on the specific sociohistorical factors of each particular case (see David and Bar-Tal 2009). In many cases, emotional attachment is achieved by appealing to interethnic threat, accompanied by exaggerating the perception of in-group weakness in comparison with threatening out-groups (see Ehala and Zabrodskaja 2011; Giles and Johnson 1987). The same goes for group distinctiveness. According to Barth (1969), group distinctiveness is not entirely based on empirical differences between the members of two different ethnic groups; rather, the differences are selected and used to make the groups appear distinctive. The same or even relatively larger differences may be unnoticed in a case where there is reason to be inclusive. Thus, the impact of ethnic temperature rise seems to be fairly uniform: emotional attachment, commitment and unity increase, the group boundaries become less permeable, and the group tries to appear more distinctive from out-groups. All this makes a group more vital: its members are more willing to contribute, and even if members do not contribute, the closed interethnic boundaries prevent them from leaving the group.

The transitional processes from a cold mode of operation to a hot mode form the crucial point of attention in language maintenance and ethnolinguistic vitality research

because they are the key to a successful maintenance of heritage ethnic identity and the linguistic and cultural practices characteristic of it. On the other hand, the transition to a hot state creates considerable instability because of increased intergroup hostility. In short, understanding the nature and mechanism of the transitional processes enables political practitioners and decision-makers to have more influence on interethnic processes in contemporary multiethnic societies.

### **Ethnic temperature of post-Soviet ethnicities**

Two central issues that need to be resolved for the metaphor of hot and cold ethnicities to have explanatory value are to specify what factors influence ethnic temperature and how the temperature can be measured. A promising area to explore this is provided by the post-Soviet space. The following papers explore the theoretical issues outlined above from different viewpoints and in different settings. The main goal of all the analyses, both triangulated and comparative, presented in the present collection is to reveal the relationships between the processes of identity dynamics and collective emotional alignment.

The first paper, 'Russians in post-Soviet Central Asia: more "cold" than the others? Exploring (ethnic) identity under different socio-political settings', by Natalya Kosmarskaya, explores the identity and the social/political behaviour of Russians in post-Soviet Central Asia through a comparison with the Baltic countries, using the 'hot and cold ethnicity' paradigm. In terms of empirical findings, the paper is based on the author's extensive fieldwork among ethnic Russians and other Russophones of Kyrgyzstan (1996–2003) and Uzbekistan (2002, 2004), and their urban populations (five fieldwork trips between 2007 and 2012), which was conducted mainly using qualitative sociology in its methodological approach (in-depth interviewing in a life history and topic-guide format). The author suggests that Central Asian Russians can be characterised as located at the 'cold' end of the spectrum of 'ethnic temperatures'. The reasons include the salience of social and cultural boundaries versus ethnic ones, the nature of local political regimes, the role and status of the Russian language and culture, and official and popular interpretations of the Soviet past.

The second paper, 'Still warm but getting colder: changing ethnic identity of post-Soviet Jewry', by Elena Nosenko-Stein, is based on the author's fieldwork carried out in 1999–2009 in several urban centres of the European part of Russia (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Penza, Krasnodar, Smolensk, Veliky Novgorod and several others). The dataset consists of 250 in-depth interviews. The author argues that, from the beginning of the Soviet era, the process of separating Jews from Judaism was very intensive; the notion of 'a Soviet Jew' was created based on new secular symbols and values that led to a cooling of the ethnic temperature of Russian Jews. In modern Russia, Jews do not have a common ethnic, national or confessional identity but do have several cultural self-identifications. The author distinguishes five types of Jewish identity in modern Russia: 'East Ashkenazi', 'Russian non-Jewish', 'Negative Jewish', 'Hybrid Jewish' and 'New Jewish' self-identification, all of which have different ethnic temperatures. The general tendency to a further ethnic cooling of the Jewish community is evident in Russia, but at the same time, the 'New Jews', who are attempting to rebuild Jewish life, maintain the Jewish ethnic temperature at the warm level.

The third paper, 'Ethnic identity in post-Soviet Belarus: ethnolinguistic survival as an argument in the political struggle', by Nelly Bekus, analyses the dynamics of an ideological confrontation between two subtypes of Belarusian identity: the hot, and

sometimes even ‘boiling’, temperature of the Belarusian ethnic idea in the environment of ethnopolitical activists and the rather cool feelings that the majority of Belarusians display towards their ethnic identity. The author argues that the recent dynamic of self-perception in Belarusian society can be interpreted as the beginning of a gradual ‘heating’ of the ethnocultural vitality of Belarusians, which is occurring under the impact of the agency of elites. Ethnolinguistic survival and vitality in this context can be viewed both as an argument in the political arena and a factor contributing to victory in the rivalry between political forces. And, inversely, the outcome of this struggle may have a crucial impact on the ‘ethnic temperature’ of Belarusians. In this context, the phenomenon of ‘ethnic temperature’ can be analysed not only from the perspective of its impact on group vitality and survival but also as a phenomenon dependent on various political, cultural and historical factors.

The fourth paper, ‘Between “official” and “unofficial” temperatures: introducing a complication to the hot and cold ethnicity theory from Odessa’, by Abel Polese, analyses the case of Odessa, a Russian-speaking city in southern Ukraine, to test the hot and cold ethnicity theory. The article is based on almost five years of fieldwork in Ukraine in the period 2003–2011, two of which were completely in Odessa. The author compares the official narrative on identity policies in the city with evidence collected through participant observation in several key areas (hospitals, schools, universities and churches), and this observation was complemented with research in six primary and secondary schools and 49 semi-structured interviews with two generations of Odessans. The author shows how the official narrative of the Ukrainian state has been received and renegotiated by the local population. While the local people have seemingly been complying with new state instructions about language use, in reality the practices have changed very little. Even though the political activism of Russian-speakers is low on the grass-roots level, they are effectively able to act in their collective interests. This raises the issue of how to measure the level of activeness of groups, and what actions should be considered as counting towards the definition of cold and hot.

The fifth paper, ‘Hot and cold ethnicities in the Baltic states’, by Martin Ehala and Anastassia Zabrodskaja, discusses the temperature of the main ethnic groups in the Baltic states: Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, the three Russian-speaking communities and the Latgalian and Polish minorities in Latvia and Lithuania, respectively. The study used a triangulated methodology that includes a survey questionnaire for quantitative study and an associated protocol for a semi-structured focus group interview. The qualitative focus group interviews provided more substantial information on how the respondents belonging to different ‘ethnic’ groups forecast their ethnic identity dynamics over time and how they saw interethnic relations developing in their country. The aim of the methodology was to make the notion of ethnic temperature quantitatively assessable while retaining the possibility of rich qualitative description to understand its nature. The quantitative analysis confirmed the wide divergence of subgroups within each ethnic group, each of which had a different ethnic temperature, as found in other studies in this special issue. The (intergroup) interaction of the members of these subgroups influenced both the average temperature of the in-group as well as the temperature of significant out-groups.

The concluding article, ‘Formation of territorial collective identities: turning history into emotion’, by Martin Ehala, analyses the theoretical implications of the case studies and further issues that need attention within the hot and cold paradigm.



## Conclusion

To understand the phenomena of symbolic and discursive natures, one has to approach them from the internal perspective, based on the construction of reality (Flick 2002, 48). In addition, societal phenomena need to be analysed in a maximally multifaceted way. By combining different research methods and/or objects, it is possible to fit the different aspects of the problem into one coherent framework (see Flick 2002, 81). Therefore, triangulation plays an important role in the study of sociocultural phenomena (Teddle and Tashakkori 2009). The subjective point of view, which is unavoidable and essential in studying identity, is also a central part of qualitative studies (Flick 2002, 20). At the same time, the usage of qualitative methods requires the availability and understanding of basic information (Flick 2002, 73) – an opportunity for this can be provided by a theoretically based quantitative study (see Ehala and Zabrodska, this issue).

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