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National and Regional Citizenship Identities: a study of post-communist youth

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Abstract

This study explores how young people construct their citizenship identities and how schools and particular geographical spaces and places shape youths' sense of belonging and forms of civic identification. The main empirical data comes from a sample of high-school students in two contrasting border regions of Ukraine where identities are influenced from outside, are more fluid and often at stake. I attempt to observe the interrelationship between the identity constructs promoted by the official state educational discourse, interplay of regional and local forces, and those produced by the high school students evidenced in writing, group discussions and individually. I argue that school context does not allow for the development of student activism and agency.

Introduction

The emergence of Ukraine as a new state after the break-up of the USSR was referred to by scholars as a 'historical novelty', 'unexpected nation', 'nowhere nation'[1] due to the fact that Ukraine as an independent political entity had never previously existed within its present borders. Wilson (1997) suggests that serious difficulties exist in imagining Ukrainian history either as a temporal or a geographical continuum, as the various regions that make up modern Ukraine have moved in and out of Ukrainian history at different times forming a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Crimean Tatar Khanate, the Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman empires and the USSR, but have never interacted together as an independent state. For that reason, the construction of national identity has been considered an important task of national schooling since 1991. As Ukraine continued to have a centralised curriculum this goal was realised through emphasising Ukrainian studies within such subjects as Ukrainian language and literature, history, geography, Ukrainian (folk) culture, etc. Such an arrangement has helped to ensure that the 'official' understanding of, for example, history has been reflected in textbooks used across the country. While heightening the impact of national socialisation, this state of affairs, to agree with Popson (2001: 329), 'limits societal input into the process, leaving ethnic, cultural, or regional groups fewer means by which to voice concern over the content of education'.

The interest in citizenship education in Ukraine started in mid-1990s, owing to the several western-funded initiatives which were launched within the framework of democratisation of Eastern Europe. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education such projects developed and published conceptual documents for education for democratic citizenship, textbooks and manuals for teachers. For the last few years citizenship

[1] See, for example, Matlock (2000), Wilson (2000), Hagen (1995)

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education is taught in schools where textbooks are available but it has not yet become a statutory subject, arguably partly due to the limited provision of teaching materials, and partly due to the discrepancy between state and 'western' visions of desirable citizenship education. In 2005, the Ministry of Education re-opened the project on creating an integral system of citizenship education with financial assistance from the European Commission. Despite these developments in curriculum there is little research on how students relate to school messages or what effect citizenship education has on their attitudes and knowledge.

The study discussed in this paper was designed to answer the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between national and regional citizenship identities?
- What is the role of 'place' in shaping youth citizenship identities?
- To what extent does citizenship education accommodate these different identities?

Since data analysis is in progress, followed by the theoretical, methodological and contextual background this paper concentrates on the ethnographic discussion of educational practices in relation to citizenship and provides preliminary interpretations of youth interviews.

Theoretical framework

Citizenship or political identity presupposes in most of classical theoretical literature a common national identity and a developed sense of nationhood. Debates around the impact of globalisation, supra- and sub-regionalisation, including increased transnational migration and commodification of citizenship identity in post-modern times, have challenged the supposedly precise fit between the territorial, cultural/national/linguistic and institutional boundaries of citizenship (Williams, 2003). Critical theorists point out that citizenship, even when its reach is universal, will always retain a degree of privilege for some groups, thereby disadvantaging and disempowering other groups usually defined by race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation and other identities (Young, 1998; Sassen, 2004; Lister, 2003; Yuval-Davies, 1991, Yuval-Davies *et al.*, 2007). Poststructuralists find it problematic even to argue in the name of a unified identity as gender or class or nationality is not the only identity an individual possesses. Isin and Wood (1999: 22) argue that 'postmodernisation has forced people to abandon the unitary, homogeneous concept of citizenship in favour of a multidimentional and plural concept'. Their book develops a set of overlapping and intersecting forms of radical democratic citizenship, which include the political, civil, social, economic, diasporic, cultural, sexual and ecological dimensions. These dimensions constitute the identity of a post-modern citizen, which goes beyond nationality and association with a nation-state. Gilbert (1992) also argues that the features of postmodern society require the extension of political and social membership and entitlement into cultural and economic spheres, which impact on the ability of people to make the most out of their status of citizen. The incorporation of 'a political economy of the cultural' into citizenship is extremely important for young people who understand themselves and others through the power of

cultural expression (ibid: 66). The traditional patriotic citizenship education is unlikely to work with youths who are aware of the 'pleasures and stimulation' of postmodern society and would not 'succumb to self-interested political calls for loyalty to the [national] symbols' or 'to the abstract ideals of the past golden age' (ibid: 66). One of the aims of this study was to explore how citizenship education programmes accommodate different and multiple identities of contemporary young people.

Although there is always a personal need to belong somewhere, national citizenship identification fragments and citizenship often takes more immediate local meaning. Hall *et al*. (1999), exploring how youth citizenship finds expression in notions of space and place, argue that it is difficult to separate the construction of citizenship identity from the locality in which it occurs. Central to my study is the argument that locality and citizenship are greatly interlinked, in particular, in places like national borderlands; indeed, one of my research questions concerns the extent to which 'place' shapes youth citizenship identity. I argue the borderlands provide a rich picture of the tensions between people with their identities and world views, and state power with its hegemonic interests and structures. Donnan and Wilson (1999) argue that borderlands have characteristics that differentiate them from other areas of the state historically and culturally, and that border people are part of peculiar social and political systems. In Ukraine and other countries it can be observed that cultural heterogeneity and the concentration of ethnic minorities at international boundaries sometimes pose threats to nation-state integrity. But even people of titular nationality who live in the border can be perceived differently by fellow citizens. The ambivalence of border life defines the features of border societies, which manifest themselves in ambiguous identities of people who are constantly pulled two ways by economic, cultural and linguistic factors (Strassoldo, 1982, cited Donnan & Wilson, 1999: 60). Politically they may also be pulled two ways and display a weak identification with the state in which they reside. Given the salience of regional differences in Ukraine and the political split along geographical lines, I aimed to observe the relationship between youths' national and regional citizenship identities.

Research methodology

This study is based on 56 group and 22 individual interviews, as well as 190 student essays collected during a year-long fieldwork in 2005-2006 in two regions, located in western and eastern parts of Ukraine. Besides these main research methods, I collected important information about settings and schools through documentary and secondary sources, formal and informal conversations with school staff and teachers, and observations of school life, lessons and immediate local circumstances of the youth – all of which enabled me to improve my understanding and interpretation of the ways contextual conditions shape youth citizenship identities. I met young people in schools situated in two cities and three villages belonging to the administrative provinces of Lviv and Luhansk, lying on the Polish and Russian borders respectively. The sample of schools included one pilot, four mainstream state non-selective schools (in which most of the fieldwork time was spent), and five schools containing or catering for ethnic minorities or teaching in a language different from the dominant community one (see Appendix I for school details). In eastern Ukraine, apart from the mainstream students, I interviewed Jewish, Georgian, and Armenian students, as well as students from the only

Ukrainian-language school in the city. In western Ukraine, the sample of minority ethnic students included Polish and Russian youth. Students whom I recruited to participate in my study were between 16 and 18 years old and all in their final school year.[2] I decided to choose high school students as my target population because citizenship education programmes are taught mainly in the 9^{th} – 11^{th} grades and, therefore, young people of this age should have gained some knowledge and skills both from citizenship lessons and from general training in social sciences.[3]

Data collection started by asking all participating students to write on 'what it means for them to be from their city or village'. I requested they write this in an open way without naming themselves but by providing information about their gender and ethnic background. The aim of this writing activity was to explore how important region is for the students and what meaning they ascribe to their particular place. My main data, however, comes from audio-taped focus group interviews with four to six students, which usually lasted for about 45 minutes. Groups of boys, girls and ethnic minority students were interviewed in two sessions, pre-structured around two different topics. The aim of the first focus group session was to explore students' understandings of political and national space. The questions they debated allowed me to tap into students' perception of their national and regional belonging, often in the context of their experiences of living on the borders, and evoked deep discussions about the issues of culture and ethnicity, in terms of who can and cannot be considered Ukrainian. The aim of the second focus group was to find out about political values of students to see how they link their political identity with the notion of participation, using recent political events in Ukraine as a trigger. I also sought to understand the impact of school messages around citizenship and nation-building on the young people's views and the degree to which they related to them, accepted them or distanced themselves from them. Finally, a small number of individual interviews were conducted with volunteers who participated in group discussions or those students who were not fitting in groups. These interviews were divided into three main themes, aiming to unfold family histories in relation to the country and the region, families and cultural heritage, and political and social positioning of students.

The context

The research settings were situated within two historical regions, which provide diverse contexts for studying the phenomenon of youth citizenship identities. Overall I argued these particular places would provide an opportunity to learn about the complex and contested nature of such identities. I chose the regions lying on the two borders of Ukraine (eastern and western) because they undeniably represent a complete bi-polarity but are more or less homogeneous inside themselves on the parameters ranging from

[2] The age difference can be attributed to the fact that I interviewed students at different time in the year. Some were interviewed in September when they were just starting their final school year, while others in May when they were about to leave school.

[3] The social studies cycle in high school includes subjects such as History of Ukraine, World history, History of the native region, Law, Moral education, Economics, Citizenship education, Philosophy, Human being and society (State Standard of Basic and Complete Secondary Education).

socio-economic, cultural profiles to the views and orientations of the majority of the population (see Appendix II for their hallmarks).

The Donbas is an eastern borderland located predominantly in Ukraine, although 15 per cent of it is within Russia. It is an industrial region famous for its coal-mining, iron and steel industries. Situated on the border with Russia and populated predominantly by Russian-speakers Donbas is constructed in literature and public discourse as a region with an ambivalent concept of 'Ukrainianness', often in contrast with Galicia and western Ukraine generally. The region of Galicia shared a long history within the Hapsburg Empire with Poland and was subsequently a part of Poland in 1919-39. Brubaker (1996: 98) argued that eastern (Ukrainian) Galicia was the major exception from the pattern of the indeterminate contours of national identity in 'a vast zone extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea' between 'the Poles and Russians'. In Ukraine this region has always been considered a home of Ukrainian nationalist movement.

Discussion of findings

Given that one of the purposes of the fieldwork was to ascertain the ways students' identities were shaped by citizenship education, I observed classrooms, spoke with teachers and posed relevant questions to students. Overall, it seemed that all Ukrainian schools took pride in being orderly and raising disciplined children who should understand the importance of respecting the Ukrainian state, culture and adults. The school interpretation of a desirable citizen varied a little between eastern to western parts of the country in terms of the emphasis placed on political or cultural values, but stayed within the officially defined goals of raising patriots and nationally conscious citizens. While schools in eastern Ukraine prioritised political knowledge associated with democracy, human rights and laws, western-Ukrainian schools added aspects of 'traditional' culture to the declared list of features of educational ideal, which in one rural school included (in the order of priority): faith in God, patriotism, love for freedom, love for labour, intelligent personality, high morality, faithfulness in marriage, love to one's mother and ancestry.

Despite this variation, I would argue that educational practices in schools across the country allow little room for the development of students' agency. Used to a pedagogy based on recitation, memorisation and passive listening, students see little need for subjects like citizenship education, because in their view they teach *'nothing useful for university admission exams'*. A low status of civics is also manifested in the belief of the many students that schools should teach subjects like mathematics, chemistry, geography, and languages because *'the rest of stuff they could learn with experience'*. While all citizenship teachers agreed that curriculum was designed to educate active citizens, the teaching practices did not reflect an active pedagogical approach. In eastern Ukraine, teachers, for example, banned high school students from discussing political events associated with the Orange revolution - potentially fruitful for civics lessons in schools - because, as one headteacher told me, she was afraid they were not mature enough to make a right decision. She was speaking idealistically and sentimentally about school-leavers as *'pure, good, normal kids'*, and unsurprisingly given such attitude,

students often told me that they were *'too young to have an opinion about the political situation'* or *'think about political involvement'*.

Interestingly, whenever I asked teachers about regional identity or the need to diversify the curriculum by including knowledge about different regions and peoples living in the country, they perceived this as me testing their loyalty to the ideals of the national curriculum. In relation to curriculum students in the east, however, they clearly observed the tension between their community histories and geographies of people and requirements by the state:

A.T.: *What's more important according to your textbooks, to belong to Ukraine or your region?*

Lyuba: If you take textbooks, only to Ukraine but teachers . . . our class tutor and a Physics teacher is from Russia and does not know Ukrainian and that's why she said that no longer . . . she said she will stay with us until we finish school but she cannot change [language] at this point of her life. Same with Chemistry teacher I think. It's just so inflexibly done, people's interests are not taken into account, it's not right to ukrainianise everything'.
(Steppe School, 17 year old girl)

Having preliminarily analysed focus group discussions, I identified three main dimensions of youth identities: national, regional and political (Figure 1 below). I suggest that the space and place in which they are formed serve as an important context for their interpretation but, on the other hand, in line with Massey's (1993) conceptualisation of spatial relations in society, identities are also constructed spatially. In this sense this confirms my initial attention to the place-specific analysis of youth citizenship identities. Data from the eastern borderland suggests the need to look into geographies of exclusion when interpreting students' talk. They talk as people from their place drawing on 'boundaries' within the nation, which, to use Sibley (1995: 5), emerged to separate 'the 'good' and the 'bad', the stereotypical representations of the others which inform social practices of exclusion and inclusion but which, at the same time, define the self'. These students can be perceived not only as marginalised by the fact that they live on the peripheries but actually excluded from the national space by means of dominant representation of them as not 'pure' or 'good' Ukrainians. Mainstream students in the following example speak about this injustice and negotiate their place in the country by challenging the superiority of Ukrainians in other parts of the country:

Kira: It's like in Shakespeare's [play], Montekki and Capuletti fight against each other for centuries and we also judge according to that experience, from the history […] But they are more negative towards us than us to them. For example, I have no anger towards them . . . say someone comes here from the west and we will oppress this person all together in class? I for example personally will not do this, but if we come to Kiev, as Lana said, this situation can happen

Nora: It's true, it's not even about hatred, but considering us to be idiots. There is an impression that we are dark people sitting in the mine all the time with shovels, do not see books and do not know letters, come to Kiev: 'Oh my God, you can speak?'

Lana: Yeah, as if we are from a remote village […] And this characterise them as primitive people
(Luzhaika School, 16-17 year old girls)

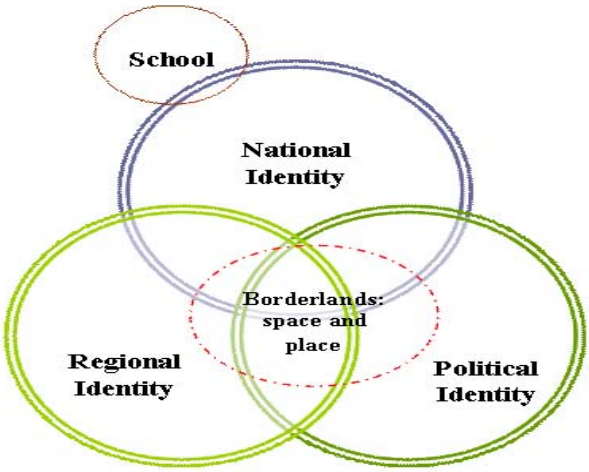
The situation with minority ethnic students in the east is somewhat different because they do not even display a wish to be Ukrainian. As the following extracts show they disassociate both from the nation and from people in other regions:

A.T.: What about other regions in Ukraine?
Ashot: They are not interesting to me […] I can say that when I was with friends in Lvov [west-Ukrainian city] and we got lost . . . and when a guy came up to us he started speaking very quickly in Ukrainian-Polish language . . . I do not understand him and I said that I did not understand Ukrainian, and he looked carefully in my face and asked, 'What's your nationality?' I told him I am Armenian. *(Copying Ukrainian language)* 'Ah, you are Armenian', you know with such a mimic on his face as if I am nothing. And I spit in his face and said, 'I am proud that I am Armenian'
(Rainbow School, 17 year old Armenian boy)

Tamara: I want to say honestly I don't even want to feel myself Ukrainian, do not want, simply *(articulates every sound)* do not want, do not want
(Rainbow School, 17 year old Georgian girl)

Muna: Yes, I supported Ruslana when she was at Eurovision. I was cheering only for Ukraine and I was so happy when she won. I felt a real Ukrainian at that time
Tamara: Honestly, when I watch such competitions I cheer for Russia rather than Ukraine *(laughter)*
A.T.: And why?
Tamara: Well, I don't know why, just have this pull
(Rainbow School, 17 year old Korean and Georgian girls)

Figure 1 *Schematic representation of themes emerging from focus group data analysis**



***** The main themes emerging from focus group data concentrate around three types of youth identities: national, regional and political, interlinked between themselves and shaped by the geographical and fictionalised space consisting of, to borrow from Bennett (2000: 63), 'a series of discourses, which involve ways of picturing the local and one's relation to it'. School at the moment seems to intersect mainly with young people's national identity.

In conclusion, I have used this paper to start to think about the complex ways young people understand, conceptualise and represent the political and social space in which they live. I was also interested in how they perceive themselves in respect to different places in the country, how they feel they are positioned by the dominant discourse of otherness and, finally, how they negotiate their identity and belonging in the given circumstances. Their ambiguous position on the borders, at least as data from the eastern Ukraine suggests, evokes feelings of marginality, exclusion, need to escape, but also provides potential for resistance and construction of separate identities. In terms of educational implications, this work might suggest that the development of pedagogy and curriculum approaches based on the engagement with the diverse geographies and family histories of students could be a productive way to tackle the insensitive attitudes to regional cultures and ethnicities in Ukraine.

Appendix I. Characteristics of schools in fieldwork sample*

Schools	**Site context**			**Aspects of school intake**				
	Region	*Place*	*Location*	*Ethnic composition*	*Medium of instruction*	*Size (N)*	*Year 11 (N)*	
							girls	*boys*
Pilot (CE)†	Donbas	Milograd	Rural	Mainstream	Russian	Medium (420)	28	21
Luzhaika (ISS)	Donbas	Luhansk	City suburban	Mainstream	Russian	Large (1,771)	103	84
Steppe (CE)	Donbas	Tarasiffka	Rural	Mainstream	Russian/ Ukrainian	Medium (302)	18	28
Veselka (WSS)	Galicia	Lviv	City centre	Mainstream	Ukrainian	Medium (460)	23	26
Lisova (WSS)	Galicia	Pirogowo	Rural	Mainstream w/ Polish minority	Ukrainian	Medium (595)	44	42
Solomon (ISS)	Donbas	Luhansk	City suburban	Only Jewish students	Russian	Small (116)	5	5
Rainbow (WSS)	Donbas	Luhansk	City suburban	Mainstream w/ ethnic diversity	Russian	Medium (unknown)	-	-
Brama (CE + ISS)	Donbas	Luhansk	City suburban	Mainstream	Ukrainian	Small (230)	-	-
Cross (ISS)	Galicia	Pirogowo	Rural	Only Polish students	Polish	Medium (unknown)	-	-
Arbat (ISS)	Galicia	Lviv	City centre	Ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking	Russian	Medium (unknown)	-	-

* *All names of schools are invented. Names of regions and large cities are retained. Names of rural places are changed.*

† Abbreviations in brackets are related to the availability of citizenship education in schools and stands for: CE – Citizenship education is taught as a separate subject, ISS – intensive training in social sciences but no separate Citizenship education course (at least not in Year 11), WSS – general weak training in social sciences and no Citizenship education.

Appendix II. Characteristics of two regional cases

Characteristics	West Ukraine (**Galicia**)	East Ukraine (**Donbas**)
Density of population and urbanization	Low	High
Landscape	Mountains and woods	Steppes
Ethnic composition	Ukrainian	Ukrainian and Russian
Language of education and environment	Mainly Ukrainian	Mainly Russian
Religion	Catholicism	Orthodoxy
Economic profile	Agricultural	Industrial
*Political orientation**	Moderate or radical nationalism, and liberal	Left-wing or liberal
Geopolitical preferences	Pro-European	Pro-Russian/CIS
Historical memories	Soviet Union as 'invader', Russians as enemies	Soviet Union as a legitimate state, Russians as the 'Slavic brothers'

* This is based on the results of the parliamentary and presidential elections held between 1991 and 2002.
Source: adapted from Wolczuk (2002).

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