

## Introduction

### **Post-Soviet Identities in Formation: Looking Back to See Where We Are Now**

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This special issue of *Nationalities Papers* brings together a unique collection of papers emerging from a collaborative project conducted by the University of Michigan Center for Russian and East European Studies from 1996 to 1999.<sup>1</sup> This project, entitled “Identity Formation and Social Problems in Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan,” combined methods training for selected scholars from these countries and for University of Michigan participants with an ambitious comparative research program.<sup>2</sup> After two months of training in Ann Arbor during the summer of 1996, participants returned to Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, where they conducted the focus group and oral history research described below. These data provide a rich store of information about how people in different regions of the former Soviet Union were dealing with the challenges of transition in the mid-1990s.

The goals of this project reached far beyond the scope of the training and research conducted, offering opportunities for collaborative work between scholars from the U.S. and the Former Soviet Union, as well as interactions among the group that crossed disciplinary boundaries. The contributors to this volume approached the project data from an array of methodological and disciplinary perspectives ranging from sociology and social psychology to history and anthropology. Uniting these diverse approaches are the qualitative data themselves, focus group and oral history interviews collected during the project, which each of the authors has incorporated into his or her larger research paradigm. Taken together, these articles present compelling interrelated analyses that expand current theoretical understandings of identity formation in the former Soviet Union.

The impact of this project has been felt by each of the participants in different ways. Many of the project participants had established careers working with quantitative social science methods, and for them the focus group and oral history methodology opened a window into the use of focus group and oral history interviewing as a supplemental research technique. For the historians and anthropologists, most of us unfamiliar with multi-site team research, the project offered an education in the challenges and special value of collecting comparative data from multiple areas using similar research instruments. The range of ways in which these scholars interacted with the resulting data is evident in the articles that make up this volume; indeed it

is this range of approaches that makes so striking the recurrence of certain themes across the site-situated articles, including the increasing importance of gender identity, and the narrative construction of regional identities in conjunction with national and ethnic identities.

This project also provided valuable opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas between disciplines, and for the building or furthering of collaborations among junior and senior scholars, and scholars from the NIS and from the United States. Although the methodological training and overall research design were decided upon by the sponsoring U.S. institution, NIS scholars contributed to the core of the project, recommending particular research sites and interviewee characteristics, and most importantly by shaping the interview schedules for focus groups and oral history research. In long discussions with American members of the research team, Rein Vöörmann and Victor Susak, whose articles are included in this volume, and other participants from Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, worked tirelessly to focus in on key social problems and aspects of identity formation that were either shared or unique to the different research sites covered by our study.

Looking back on the several years that the project spanned, the pace at which identity formation and social changes were taking place in these three countries becomes strikingly apparent. The themes of the articles in this volume—the social consequences of economic change, gender identity, environmental and health problems, and regionalism—remain lively points of discussion today. Yet, in each of these papers, the voices of “new” Estonian, Ukrainian and Uzbekistani citizens, captured just five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, speak to the lingering shock of independence, the sense that the path of post-socialism in each country was still being defined. The goal of these papers is to reflect on that particular moment in the transition of each of these countries and, in looking back, to better understand where they are now.

The participation of the Estonia, Ukrainian and Uzbekistani scholars in this project provided a mirror for these changes, a point that was brought home to me a couple of years ago, as I sat in a café in Lviv, Ukraine, with one of the contributors to this volume, Viktor Susak. We were discussing the significance of the research project that brought a disparate group of researchers together from 1996 to 1999, and I asked him what he felt the enduring relevance of the project data was. His answer surprised me by personalizing the meaning of these data. He contrasted the group’s initial bonding during the training session in 1996 to subsequent meetings over the years in Kyiv, and later in Tallinn. “In 1996 we [participants from the Former Soviet Union] felt we still shared many things, many aspects of the same identity, a Soviet identity, but then when we met later, we all began to understand that each country had gone its own way, that we were becoming less alike.” Susak’s statement speaks to the value of these focus group and oral history data: they capture a transitional moment in each of these countries, the full significance of which is visible only now as each country has continued on its own, unique path.

## Project Design and Research Methodology

The papers in this volume draw on data collected in 1996 and 1997 for the “Identity Formation and Social Problems in Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan” project. As already noted, both the design and execution of the research resulted from the collaborative efforts of the participants. The program began with a training session in qualitative methodologies (and, in particular, focus group and oral history methodologies) which brought scholars from Estonia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and the U.S. together.<sup>3</sup> During the following year, teams working in each of these countries conducted focus groups in locations and with research participants that met specific characteristics, enhancing the comparability of data across the countries. Data on focus group locations and makeup are given in Appendix A.

The focus group interview schedule was the same across all of the groups conducted in the initial research, although the final section of the schedule was left for the discussion of questions tailored to individual interview sites. In each case, the schedule was translated into the titular language of the nationality being interviewed, although participants were free to use another language (usually Russian) during the interviews if they wished. The focus group interviews were divided into six sections: introduction; improvements over the past ten years; difficulties of the last ten years; social issues (including broad questions on gender, nationality, region); site-specific questions; and conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Within these general topics, participants were given considerable latitude in selecting and pursuing particular topics.

During the final portion of the interviews, participants were asked to name one or two prominent individuals particularly involved in the social issues discussed throughout the interview. These recommendations were used to draw up an initial list of candidates for the second phase of the research. In this phase, diverse opinion leaders from each country were identified and in-depth individual life history interviews conducted with these leaders. The experience described by Susak<sup>5</sup> was typical: each research team began with the focus group recommendations, filled out the interview list to present a balance of leaders in different regions and focused on different issues. In each case, interviewees were asked open-ended questions about their life experiences, from childhood to the present, and encouraged to reflect on how those experiences influenced key decisions that led to their positions in society at the time of the interviews. A list of interviewees is given in Appendix B.

While the focus group interviews provided extensive data on the perceptions and opinions of “average” residents of Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, the life history interviews centered on the opinions of elites who had achieved recognized success in areas such as politics, social activism and business. The papers in this volume engage with the resulting trove of data: dozens of hours of recordings and volumes of transcripts prepared and translated under the guidance of each country team.

As a snapshot of ideas, attitudes and opinions of people living in these countries in the mid-1990s, the data offer a rich basis for comparisons across sites and across individual life history narrators, both within and across the countries included in this project.

### **Situating Analyses of Post-Soviet Identity Formation**

Once compiled, this corpus of data offered participating scholars a seemingly unlimited range of possible uses and interpretations. Following through on the comparative element embedded in the research design, project participants such as Michael Kennedy and Ted Hopf have directly considered the comparative implications of the corpus by focusing on particular narrative elements or trends identified across data collected in all three countries.<sup>6</sup> While revealing some differences, such an approach also points towards shared elements, Kennedy's "transition culture." As Kennedy noted, "[W]e can learn through the study of narratives how people construct the meanings of these years of transition, and in so doing, construct their own place within, or in opposition to, transition culture."<sup>7</sup> Explicitly comparative work in particular highlights the value of the systematicity with which these qualitative data were collected across the different research sites; it is this systematicity which allows us to consider narrative responses to key questions about identity and transition provided by people in particular categories across a similar range of urban and rural locations.

In contrast to these broader comparative approaches, this volume brings together situated analyses of the data from selected research sites within Estonia, Ukraine or Uzbekistan while maintaining a focus on narratives of identity in transition. The volume editors invite readers to explore the very different kind of comparison that emerges from the juxtaposition of these situated papers as key themes appear and reappear and are similarly or differently framed by focus group participants and oral history narrators. As with the directly comparative studies cited above, the structural influence of the research protocols can be seen in these data trends, for example in the way that gender is incorporated both into the research design in selecting interviewees and in the focus group questionnaire itself.<sup>8</sup>

These papers have been grouped by country, loosely organized to move from more general to more specific studies. This organization is intended to encourage a reading of country-based research across disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, as with the data themselves, the links across the articles, topically and in their conclusions, highlight other themes that resonated in all of the research sites, such as social interpretations of economic transformation, the meaning of gender categories during and after the Soviet period, and the role of regionalism in the development of complex post-Soviet national and ethnic identities.

For example, Anderson and Romani's discussion of attitudes towards marketization in Estonia echo data presented in other papers, such as Kamp's consideration

of economic change as a topic of discussion within Uzbek focus group and oral history data, and Dickinson's approach to supplementary focus group data on the transformation of work in rural Ukraine. However, beyond these articles, references to the social effects of economic change appear throughout the volume, threaded through discussions of regional, national, and gender identity, for example in Liu's discussion of the "regionalization" of discourses of economic difficulty. This is yet another indicator of how cross-disciplinary, integrated analyses of social issues allow scholars to capture important interconnections between elements within a shifting system and identify productive avenues for further research.

Regional identity formation, central to articles by Malanchuk, Liu and Fein, is another important theoretical focus that provides connections across contributions to the volume. Malanchuk approaches the broader social implications of regional identity in Ukraine, touching on some of the same issues as Liu's analysis of the narrative construction and expression of regional identity in the Uzbekistan focus groups. Fein considers another aspect of post-Soviet ethnicities and regionalism in her analysis of Estonian Russian identity formation during this period as a process of boundary adjustment, challenging simplified notions of ethnic or national identity. In each of these cases, "region," incorporated into the larger study as a comparative element through the collection of data in different cities, emerges as a nuanced and powerful component of emerging identities, one that these authors demonstrate is intimately linked to broader social problems such as unemployment, poverty, health care and ethnic tensions. The questions raised in these articles, how "regions" become available for use as the basis of identity categories, and, further, how these are related to the development of post-Soviet national and ethnic identities, have implications beyond the articles in this volume, as evidenced in the complexity of recent events such as the political upheavals in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

One of the most important characteristics considered in formulating the focus groups was gender; to provide comparability across the three countries, the focus groups were either all male or all female. This division provided unusual opportunities to compare men's and women's perceptions of social change during this period, and many of the papers reflect on the similarities and contrasts that emerged across the groups. For example, Vöörmann considers both social attitudes about gender characteristics and roles in Estonia and men's and women's statements within the Estonian focus groups in his discussion of changes in men's and women's economic opportunities and responsibilities in the post-Soviet period. Kamp and Dickinson also consider gendered expectations and variable opportunities for men and women as cultures of work shift in Uzbekistan and rural Ukraine, respectively. Here again, a focus on gender ideologies and their importance in the narration of gendered experience of other forms of identity, such as occupational identity and national identity, provides fertile ground for further research and theorization of identity formation in post-socialist contexts.

Susak's article stands out in this volume as the only one to concentrate exclusively on the life history data compiled for the project. His focus on these biographical interviews reveals how Soviet policies and politics shaped the lives of each of the narrators, and how in each case formative experiences during the Soviet period, whether good or bad, were integral to the prominent positions as opinion leaders these people achieved in the early post-Soviet period. Like Susak's contribution, all of the articles in this volume address the issue of how Soviet policies, identities and approaches affected the development of post-Soviet identities and perceptions of social problems.

The shared commonalities of the Soviet system and the way they shaped lives are starkly evident across these papers, yet at the same time unique concerns in each country are already apparent. In focus groups and life history interviews, the voices of participants are alive with common concerns such as unemployment and educational opportunities, but also with country-specific discussions that have since contributed to the unique post-Soviet "flavor" of each location—issues of language politics, ethnicity, regionalism, religion and the appropriate role of the government in post-Soviet transformation. In particular, Malanchuk's link of these older data to recent events in Ukraine, Liu's consideration of post-9/11 Uzbek political discourse in light of focus group data from the 1990s, and Vöormann's assessment of recent trends in Estonian women's employment all highlight the importance of continued research into the post-Soviet processes of identity formation in both country-specific and comparative perspectives.

Taken together, these articles offer a multi-faceted analysis of a rich corpus of comparative, qualitative data. At the same time, the authors, through their analyses, raise important theoretical questions about the limits of comparability. In their situated analyses of post-Soviet identities in formation, they offer insights and avenues for subsequent research on broader questions, such as the enduring role of past and current state practices in shaping experiences of, for example, gender identity. Furthermore, these articles demonstrate the value of qualitative data by analyzing post-Soviet voices and, in particular, commonalities of narrative devices, the repetition of particular terms and phrases, or agreement voiced by participants within and across focus groups or life history interviews. Whether used to supplement quantitative studies, or as the primary source of data, this focus on these interviews as sites where post-Soviet identities are "put into practice" again invites broader, more interdisciplinary approaches to theorization and study of larger issues of identity formation.

While each unique in perspective and use of the data, these papers are connected through years of dialogue among members of this research team as they gathered, processed and analyzed this data set. More importantly, the papers present dialogues among focus group participants and between interviewers and life history narrators from a pivotal point in the development of post-Soviet Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. It is these dialogues that encourage us to look back and, in looking back, to better understand where the study of identity formation and social problems in post-Soviet countries stands now, and where scholars can take it next.



## Appendix A. Focus Groups in Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan

### *Estonia*

- Tallinn (the Estonian capital, mixed ethnicity/nationality)
  - Two groups of Russians, one all male and one all female, with at least some higher education.
  - Two groups of Estonians, one all male and one all female, with at least some higher education.
- Narva (a provincial city in eastern Estonia; primarily ethnic Russians)
  - Two groups of Russians, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Tartu (a provincial city in southern Estonia, primarily ethnic Estonian)
  - Two groups of Estonians, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Tamsalu (a rural village in southern Estonia, primarily ethnic Estonian)
  - Two groups of Estonians, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Sillamae (a Baltic coast city, primarily Russian)
  - Two groups of Russians, one all male, and one all female, with no more than secondary education.

### *Ukraine*

- Kiev (the Ukrainian capital, mixed ethnicity/nationality)
  - Two groups of Russians, one all male and one all female, with at least some higher education.
  - Two groups of Ukrainians, one all male and one all female, with at least some higher education.
- Donetsk (a provincial city in southeastern Ukraine, primarily ethnic Russian)
  - Two groups of Russians, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Lviv (a provincial city in western Ukraine, primarily ethnic Ukrainian)
  - Two groups of Ukrainians, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Olexandrivka (a rural village in southwestern Ukraine, primarily ethnic Ukrainian)
  - Two groups, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Ivankiv (a city just outside the Chernobyl zone, mixed nationalities)
  - Two groups, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.

*Uzbekistan*

- Tashkent (the Uzbek capital, mixed ethnicity/nationality)  
Two groups of Uzbeks, one all male and one all female, with at least some higher education.  
Two groups of Europeans (primarily Russians), one all male and one all female, with at least some higher education.
- Bukhara (a provincial city in western Uzbekistan, mixed ethnicity/nationality)  
Two groups of rural Uzbeks, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.  
Two groups of urban Tajiks, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Ferghana (a provincial city in eastern Uzbekistan)  
Two groups, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.
- Moynak (a provincial city formerly on the Aral Sea, mostly Karakalpak)  
Two groups, one all male and one all female, with no more than secondary education.

**Appendix B. Oral History Narrators**

Job titles are those at the time the interview was conducted. The language used for the interviews is given in parentheses.

*Estonia*

- Mikhail Bronshtein, former Member of Parliament, advisor to the Estonian Embassy in Moscow (1992–1995) and Tartu University professor (Russian)
- Nikolai Jugantsev, Director and a co-owner of the company SVL BOTRANS (oil product exports) (Russian)
- Siim Kallas, former President of Estonian Bank (organizer of monetary reform), former Minister of Foreign Affairs, currently leader of the Reform Party and Member of Parliament (Estonian)
- Tunne Kelam, Member of Parliament from Pro Patria Party and Vice Speaker of the Parliament since 1992 (Estonian)
- Reet Laja, department chair in the Ministry of Social Affairs (Estonian)
- Marju Lauristin, Tartu University professor and former Minister of Social Affairs (Estonian)
- Nikolai Sovetnikov, member of the Narva city government (Russian)
- Urmas Tamm, leader of a local village council (rural area) (Estonian)
- Andres Tarand, Member of Parliament, leader of the Moderates, and former Prime Minister (Estonian)
- Andra Veidemann, Minister of European Affairs, leader of the Development Party and former Member of Parliament (Estonian)



*Ukraine*

Oral histories conducted by Victor Susak, Institute for Historical Research, Lviv State University, Lviv:<sup>9</sup>

- Oleksa Hudyma, leader of the Lviv Region RUKH (People's Movement of Ukraine) Organization
- Irina Isakova, President of TIGRIS private tourist company (Donetsk) (Russian)
- Vasyl Kuibida, Mayor of Lviv (Ukrainian)
- Valentyna Protsenko, leader of the Donetsk Region People's RUKH Organization (Ukrainian)
- Victor Pynzenyk, Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine (for economic reform) (Ukrainian)
- Oleg Rybakov, leader of the Donetsk Region branch of the Socialist Party of Ukraine (Russian)
- Olga Sadovska, President of O-LIA private florist company (Lviv) (Ukrainian)
- Yevgen Talipov, leader of the Lviv branch of the Socialist Party of Ukraine, non-salaried advisor to the head of the Supreme Council of Ukraine (Russian)
- Andrii Tavpash, General Director of the SVITTOCH confectionery factory (Lviv) (Ukrainian)
- Yuri Zayats, trade union leader at the A. F. Zasad'ka coal mine (Donetsk) (Russian)

Oral histories conducted by "Social Monitoring" Centre, Kyiv:

- Valerij Borzov, Member of Parliament, Head of the National Olympic Committee
- Liliya Grigorovich, Member of Parliament, Deputy Minister of Family and Youth Affairs, member of People's RUKH
- Anatoli Matviyenko, Ukrainian Supreme Soviet Deputy, Head of the National Democratic Party of Ukraine, Head of the parliamentary faction of the National Democratic Party (Ukrainian)
- Liliya Piltaj, Vice President of the "Children of Chernobyl" Foundation (Russian)
- Nataliya Vitrenko, Member of Parliament from the Progressive Socialist Party (Russian)

*Uzbekistan*

- Hasan Chutbaevich Boriev, Rector of the State University of Agricultural Sciences, Tashkent; Deputy of the Supreme Assembly, Republic of Uzbekistan; former aide to the President's Cabinet (Uzbek)
- Galina Chebakova, Editor-in-Chief of the weekly newspaper *Biznes-Vestnik Vostoka* (Russian)
- Bahramjon Mahmudovic Ergashev, Vice-Hokim of Ferghana Province responsible for agricultural issues, former Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, former Secretary of the Ferghana Province CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and former Secretary of Agriculture at Obkom (Uzbek)

- Fatima Ghulomrizoevna Ibrahimova, former Rector of a high school in Bukhara; currently a pensioner and the founder and director of a Muslim women's society concerned with social and educational services in Bukhara (Uzbek)
- Husan Karimovich Karimov, former chief engineer of Oblkhozstroi in Ferghana; former chairman of mahalla committee in Vuadil village, Ferghana Province; former employee at the Ferghana department of local industry; member of the Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan; former journalist on the republican newspaper *Red Uzbekistan*; currently unemployed (Uzbek)
- Nozim Khabibullaev, Director of the Timurids Museum (Russian)
- Nina Kiryukhina, Head of the Gynecology Department at the Ferghana City Hospital (Russian)
- Muhiddin Boqievich Latipov, Chairman of the Union of Entrepreneurs of Ferghana Province and former assistant manager of the Ferghana regional trust on economic issues (Uzbek)
- Erkin Vohidov, Chairman of the Committee on International Relations, Supreme Assembly, Republic of Uzbekistan; famous Uzbek poet; co-founder of Erk (Freedom) Party, one of the two Uzbek opposition parties created during perestroika (Uzbek)
- Mukarramkhon Abduraimovna Yusupova, Director of Mohigul, a private clothier firm in Ferghana, and former Deputy Director of the regional department of jersey knitting (Uzbek)

## NOTES

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2. The editors of this volume would like to thank Michael Kennedy, Director of the International Institute at the University of Michigan for his directorship of this project, as well as Donna Parmelee, from the University of Michigan Center for Russian and East European Studies, for her extensive administrative support of the activities associated with this project.
3. Janet Hart of the University of Michigan designed and coordinated the qualitative methods course and David L. Morgan of Portland State University conducted the focus group training.
4. See Michael Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Post-Communism: Emancipation, Transition, Nation and War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 304–7 for a template of the focus group interview schedule.
5. This volume.

6. See, for example, the following: Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Post-Communism*; Michael Kennedy, "The Spatial Articulation of Identity and Social Issues: Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan through Focus Groups," in Kimitaka Matuzato, ed., *Regions: A Prism to View the Slavic–Eurasian World. Towards a Discipline of "Regionology"* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2000); Ted Hopf, "Making the Future Inevitable: Legitimizing, Stabilizing and Naturalizing the Transition in Estonia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2002, pp. 403–436.
7. Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Post-Communism*, p. 161.
8. The necessity of segregating men and women for Uzbek focus groups further required similar separation in the other research sites to ensure comparability.
9. A supplemental grant was awarded to Victor Susak at the Institute for Historical Research in Lviv to conduct five additional oral histories beyond the initial five planned for the project.