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## Everyday Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Space. Methodological Reflections

Emilia Pawłusz\* & Oleksandra Seliverstova

### Abstract

This article presents a methodological approach to the study of nation-building in everyday life in the post-Soviet region. Although bottom-up and informal mechanisms of creating identity have been acknowledged in the literature and methodology of nationalism studies, they have seldom been applied to studies in the post-Soviet countries. This article discusses the strengths and limitations of such an approach, using the example of two studies – on consumption and national identity in Ukraine and on music and nation-building in Estonia.

**Keywords:** post-Soviet space, national identity, informal nation-building, Estonia, Ukraine.

### Introduction

The post-Soviet political and social transformations provided a rich variety of topics to be addressed by the academic community. One strand of literature that appeared in such conditions evolved around the topics of state, nation-building and the formation of national identity. The biggest wave of scholarly literature about this region appeared at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. Although it discussed various aspects of the founding of post-Soviet nations, it was usually limited to a macro perspective and focused on the main political actors: the state, the political elite, and their actions (language and citizenship policies). Alternatively, scholars surveyed popular attitudes towards politics and established official national symbols (Brubaker, 1996; Laitin, 1998; Kolstø, 1996, 2006). Over time, scholars have observed that nation-building engages multiple actors on various levels of the society and that the elite's vision of the nation is often contested by socially and ethnically diverse populations (Isaacs and Polese, 2015; Polese, 2011). The top-down approach has been a point of critique and this has contributed to the increase in studies that turn attention to the agency of ordinary citizens and non-state actors. Such studies emphasise the context of everyday, private, informal practices and interactions in which the ideas of national belonging are embedded, reinforced and recreated.

This paper contributes to this growing body of literature by discussing modifications of methodological choices that emerged during the data collection process and challenges that stem from this theoretical approach. We identified that while the literature on nation-building in post-Soviet spaces has remained constant in time, the methodological lenses through which the scholars approached processes of nation-building and identity formation have not been diversified and addressed in literature with the same level of scrutiny. Most of the literature focused on registered, measured or official data, neglecting the everyday aspect of identity formation. This article aims to fill this gap by presenting a composite methodology for studying national identity in the context of everyday life and mundane practices performed by ordinary citizens. We stress the usefulness of different aspects of an ethnographic approach such as participation in everyday life situations, and

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focusing on non-declarative, affective, implicit and tacit aspects of identity (such as material settings and belongings). Such an approach contributes to the understanding of identity based on unnoticed, 'banal', or formally invisible practices and actors that renegotiate the political narrative and contribute to reshaping the perception of how national identity is formed.

Although the bottom-up approach is not novel in worldwide literature (Edensor, 2002; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008), it is only recently being applied in studies of major post-Soviet socio-political processes (Adams, 2009). We believe that it is particularly useful, as many aspects of political, social and economic life in the post-Soviet area have remained in place and are largely influenced by informal practices (cf. Morris & Polese, 2015). The impact of informality in terms of methodology is that existing official data and standardised ways of collecting data, such as surveys or structured interviews with elite political representatives, are not sufficient to grasp the complexity and changing aspects of the formation of national identity in the region.

We illustrate our argument and approach with two case studies. The first case study, which is discussed by the first author, is about the relationship between consumption practices and material objects and the sense of national belonging. It draws attention to how Ukrainians design and affirm their national self-image through aesthetic choices of certain home decoration elements and their narration about them. In particular, the author reveals which steps of the research design process and data collection helped to identify symbolic meanings of home, home possessions and consumption practices associated with a sense of national belonging. First, the author shares her way of finding appropriate tools to collect data, showing how it is a continuous process that should be rethought and adapted regularly even after stepping into the field. Second, she demonstrates how the context of time, space and public discourse in which an interview is conducted can affect the interview itself, its interpretation, and even the role of the researcher in his/her study. The study shows some nuanced aspects of interviewing in home settings, in which observation of material culture could be a valuable source of data (Stimson, 1986), thus encouraging other researchers to develop some anthropological sensitivity while exploring such a multidimensional and contested process as national identity formation.

The second study explores how the sense of national belonging is recreated in contemporary Estonia through collective musical practices and national song performance. It is an ethnographic study of the national song festival and choral singing, which from the public perspective is an 'authentic Estonian thing'. The festival, which is a state-funded event, yet possible only thanks to the widespread popularity of choral singing, is an example of a practice that exposes how formal nation-building driven by the state is intertwined and largely supported by the informal and mundane. It also exposes the ambiguous position of the people who organise the national celebration – their shifting identities and sometimes conflicting discourses that arise depending on the context of the interview. The study points to a major yet understudied aspect of identity – its affective, performative and bodily dimension. Consequently, the author poses a question about emotions and empathy as a way of generating knowledge and argues that there is a need – and space – for emotional reflexivity in the practice of researching national identity.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it engages in theoretical and methodological debates on nation-building in scholarly literature. Second, the two empirical illustrations are presented. The first (empirical) case study is narrated and discussed by Author 1 and the second one by Author 2. Emphasis is placed on methodological choices rather than the comprehensive analysis of the findings. Finally, the conclusion offers a summary and discussion of the proposed methodology, its strengths and limitations, as well as recommendations for further research.

## Theoretical and methodological approaches to nation-building

Most scholars interested in the post-Soviet countries have until now approached the topic of nation-building using a macro, top-down perspective. Studies within this approach investigated actions of political elites and various policies, such as language and citizenship policies, which have been the most visible and pronounced indicators of how the new states and their elites addressed the questions of nationality, ethnicity and minority-majority relations. There is an abundance of literature that adopts such a perspective (Arel, 1995; Kuzio, 1998; Laitin, 1998; Mole, 2012; Smith et al., 1998). The usual methodological approach involves interviews with policy makers, analysis of official documents, policies and statistical data on language use or declared national identification. Furthermore, the multi-ethnic composition of post-Soviet societies – more specifically, how national policies in recently emerged nation-states did or did not accommodate various ethnic minority groups living in their territories – has been increasingly stimulating academic interest. In general, such studies resulted in two main strands of inquiry. The first one examines ethnic tensions and conflicts that either appeared or were suppressed in the former area of the Soviet Union (Coppieters, 2004; Lynch, 2002; Tishkov, 1997). The second one concentrates on symbolic aspects of nation-building and explores how official symbols were accepted/rejected by different ethnic or language groups (Denison, 2009; Kolstø, 1996, 2006).

Concurrently, a vast body of literature has developed, which inquires into the everyday life of post-Soviet people; namely, how they have coped with the transition and how they have constructed their identities. However rich in empirical evidence, this literature does not address the process of nation formation directly; it usually lacks the link between the macro and micro dimension of nation-building. Yet, some studies make references to how the sense of national belonging in the new post-Soviet reality is developed through consumption practices of food (Caldwell, 2002; Patico, 2008) and clothing (Gurova, 2014; Pilkington, 2002), participation in informal economic practices (Humphrey 2002; Polese 2009), and exposure to new types of media, especially advertisement (Morris, 2005).

A newer strand of scholarship on nation-building aims to combine top-down and bottom-up approaches and bridge the gap between formal policies and everyday life experiences (Brubaker et al. 2006; Cheskin, 2013; Isaacs & Polese, 2015; Polese, 2011; Rodgers, 2007). Studies within this approach do not dismiss the gravity of top-down policies, yet acknowledge that nation-building is a two-way and multi-faceted process. Ordinary citizens and their actions cannot be perceived as passive recipients of elite strategies but rather as active actors who adaptively transform the nation-state. Their sense of belonging is not only declarative, but also performative, creative, dynamic and goes beyond binary categories often imposed in more conventional ways of researching identity.

The pioneering work that valued such an approach was David Laitin's (1998) study of the Russian-speaking populations in the neighbouring post-Soviet countries, in which he combined surveys, discourse analysis of identity categories in the post-Soviet press, and ethnographic data such as family stories. Still, like other early studies of the post-Soviet nation-building, Laitin's work focused primarily on language as a proxy of identity, because it is easy to 'monitor and measure' (Laitin, 1998, p. 368). While singling out one aspect of culture is useful, especially in comparative studies, it poses the questions of what other significant aspects of identity expression and construction there are, or to what extent language is indeed a proxy for identity in the post-Soviet context.

Other scholars such as Isaacs and Polese (2015, 2016) challenged the language and elite-focused approach to nation-building. They argued for an interdisciplinary approach that includes sociological and ethnographic accounts of other proxies and sites of national identity construction such as schools, public events, arts, or religious practices. Although their works offer a fresh view on the complexity of the nation-building processes in the post-Soviet area, they do not explicitly engage in a discussion on methodological choices.

A notable example of methodological reflexivity can be found in the work of Adams (2009) on how the political elite of Uzbekistan 'imagines' the nation through public holidays. Adams advocates ethnography as a method that gives access to the self-understanding of individuals in a variety of contexts and in practical terms. She argues that ethnography is especially suited for discovering deep cognitive schemes of identity, which are often discarded in official narratives and not accessible through mainstream methodological approaches.

Beyond the post-Soviet context, the bottom-up perspective on national identity is more acknowledged. Inspired by the work on banal aspects of nationalism by Billig (1995), scholars such as Edensor (2002), Foster (2002), Brubaker et al. (2006) and Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) have explored national identity from the perspective of ordinary citizens, popular culture, or everyday practices.

Robert Foster's (2002) studies of national identity in Papua New Guinea and Turkey showed that mechanisms of banal nationalism are also applicable in non-capitalist and developing countries. He used a variety of methods, inter alia the semiotic analysis of advertisements, analysis of the symbolic meaning of the Olympic Torch relay, and in-depth interviews with ordinary people. Thanks to this diversity of methods and flexibility of data sources, his study on mass media and commodity consumption demonstrated how different elements of everyday life 'serve to anchor the nation in the everyday life' (Foster, 2002, p. 64). Moreover, Foster's work provided a new understanding of the concept of 'consumer citizenship', defining it as the 'production of national identity by way of shared consumption practices' (Foster & Özcan, 2005, p. 5).

Tim Edensor (2002) also turns to everyday life when studying national identity in the United Kingdom and focuses mostly on popular and material cultures. He discusses the role of space, landscapes, material objects, and products of material culture in the development and solidification of the sense of national belonging. However, his most innovative contribution lies in his idea to group everyday practices into three main types of actions. They are as follows: performing the nation through formal and popular rituals and ceremonies; representing the nation through tourist-oriented materials and mythic heroes portrayed in films; and exhibiting the nation through nation-wide exhibitions.

Brubaker et al.'s (2006) work on nationalism in Romanian Transylvania represents a study of the synergy of macro and micro actors that 'make' the nation. The authors performed an analysis of policy making grounded in the context of historical narratives and an ethnographic study of everyday conversations and practices. They concluded that there is a significant number of discrepancies between official national discourse and how a sense of nationality and ethnicity are experienced in everyday life. Nationality or ethnicity should not be viewed as fixed social groups/categories, but rather as different cognitive schemes that change, appear/disappear depending on who is operating them.

The above-described studies demonstrate that renegotiation of what nation is for people and 'materialization' of nation happens not in the couloirs of government buildings, but in the domain of everyday life – streets, homes, markets, schools, shops, stadiums, etc. All of these works are embedded in the context, are strongly qualitative and interpretative, and almost intuitively employ a variety of ethnographic data. Yet, with the exception of Adams (2009), they lack an explicit reflection on the link between their theoretical approaches and methods of data collection, analysis and presentation. This problem is addressed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), whose contribution to rethinking the methodology of researching everyday nationhood is particularly relevant for this paper. The authors discuss the necessity to apply multiple methods that are sensitive to the context, in order to reveal national identity processes at the level of mundane life. Their study proposes a methodological agenda for researching national identity 'from below'; it discusses the use of surveys, as well as qualitative interviewing that includes observation of both declarative and non-discursive messages such as bodily expressions, gestures, etc. Rather than imposing the researcher's own categories of national identifications in interviewing, the authors suggest to 'wait and listen' as respondents 'naturally' refer to the ideas of nationhood. To see when and how the nation unfolds, the authors recommend participant observation as the least intrusive method.

Following the approach of Fox and Miller-Idriss, this paper aims to make a twofold contribution to the methodological reflection on studying nation-building and identity formation. First, it ‘pushes’ the reflection on interviewing and participant observation even further by discussing different contexts and aspects of interviews and informal conversations, reflecting on the role of the researcher’s position and identity, as well as emotional reflexivity as a source of data on identity and approach to analysis. Rather than advocating ethnography as a method for identity studies in general, we argue that incorporating anthropological sensitivity into mainstream political science/political sociology might shed light on everyday, implicit, practical aspects of national identity construction, and thus complement more top-down or macro oriented quantitative and mainstream qualitative approaches.

Second, this paper reflects upon the methodological agenda of research into everyday nationhood in the context of the post-Soviet area. We argue that even if they are informal, everyday aspects of identity formation have been acknowledged on the theoretical level, little has been done to reflect upon them in terms of the methodology of such research in the post-Soviet context. Having done research in post-Soviet countries (Estonia, Ukraine), we use data generated on-site to discuss semi-structured and informal interviewing on multiple sites, as well as different aspects of ethnographic sensitivity. We consider the flexibility of sampling and exposure as a sampling technique (Shea-Schwartz & Yanow, 2012) and call on other researchers to reflect not only on their role as insiders or outsiders (Weinreb, 2006), but also on their own identity and how it might be affected by the research itself. The ‘banality’ of the everyday life often translates into the respondents’ difficulty to comment on or even connect to their identity in such contexts. With respect to that issue, we argue in favour of paying attention to non-declarative identity performances. An effective methodology to study identity in the context of the mundane has to embrace non-verbal sources of data such as material objects and possessions, the context of a physical setting and situation, emotional gestures, acts and everyday life practices that demonstrate the ‘normalcy’ and specifics of nationhood as a category of reference. We believe the above-described aspects of identity formation and nation-building are usually hard to trace using conventional methods such as policy analysis, surveys and even qualitative interviewing, which often focus on the declarative level and/or official discourse, omitting the aspects of multiple and contested meanings of identity, nationhood, and symbols. Finally, we discuss the researcher’s personal background, as well as his/her interaction in the field as a source of insights and information often disregarded in the process of data collection and analysis. This observation is especially relevant in the research of collective identity, since it exposes the relational, performative and dynamic character of identity expressions (Tilly, 2005). The following two empirical studies serve as an illustration of the above-mentioned claims. To facilitate the understanding of our claims, we summarise methodological extensions in Table 1. (see below), which we suggest to be added while exploring everyday identity formation.

**Table 1:** Anthropological extensions in the study of everyday identity formation

Sampling	Flexible sampling for extending the context of discovery; Exposure for an effective sampling strategy to map contentious, conflicting identity discourses;
Interviewing	Attention to the context and setting of interviews and their influence over the outcome as well as over the role of the researcher; Acknowledging the interview as a dialogical, relational performance in which the researcher invites or patiently waits for identity performance;
Observing	Observation of physical settings, gestures, face expressions while doing interviews; Attention to non-declarative aspects of identity formation: from tangible objects to emotions
Interpreting	Reflection on the researcher’s role, background, power, interactions, identity, thoughts and emotions in the field

Source: authors’ compilation

## Study 1

### Exploring the invisible aspects of Ukrainian identity through its visible representations in the domestic sphere

This section presents a study that analyses national identity through everyday consumption practices. In particular, it focuses on the process of embodiment of national symbolic meanings in everyday material objects and practices of consumption, with the purpose of seeing how the concept of nation is grounded in 'banal' life. The results of this study not only reveal a multitude of non-official national symbols, conceived at the level of everyday life, but they also demonstrate how such symbols are established and then practiced for national self-affirmation by ordinary people.

Previous studies on post-Soviet nationalism analysing the main ways and sites of the expression of national belonging often looked at official national symbols and participation in national events, such as parades, ceremonies or national holidays (Kolstø, 2006; Smith, 1998). As part of a critique of this approach, some scholars started to acknowledge the fluidity of national symbols, pointing also to the importance of non-official national symbols (Brubaker et al., 2006; Kuzio, 1998;) and alternative sites for evoking national sentiments, such as the Eurovision song contest (Danero, 2015), Olympic games (Persson and Petersson, 2014) and the 'Colour revolutions' (Ó Beacháin and Polese, 2010).

Everyday life as a site for the expression of national identity is an area of inquiry that is only starting to gain popularity in post-Soviet studies (Isaacs and Polese, 2016). Consumption constitutes an important part of everyday life and it is rich in symbolic meaningfulness and has a direct impact on the identity formation process (Douglas, 2002; Miller, 1995). The results driven from the empirical data of this case study show that besides being a stage for the expression of nationhood consumption also represents a sphere in which national sentiments are renegotiated and shaped.

The two case study locations of this research are Tallinn (Estonia) and Lviv (Ukraine). The main data, which consists of 38 interviews conducted in Lviv and 29 in Tallinn, was collected during 2014 and 2015. Though the discussions of this paper are based on both case studies, only the one on Lviv will be used to illustrate the reflective process of finding and applying appropriate methodology. The main method of inquiry was semi-structured interviews with a focus on ordinary consumption practices in four selected domains of everyday life, namely: food, home, leisure and fashion (clothing consumption). The examples presented in this paper are drawn from the selected material on home and home-related consumption. The rationale behind focusing only on the topic of home is dictated by the content and dynamics of the majority of interviews conducted in Lviv, in which the topic of home tended to turn into particularly vivid discussions and, therefore, also became the richest topic for illustrating the main argument. Interviewing was supplemented by additional research methods, such as close reading of research relevant documents, webpages, brochures, fashion, culinary and home interior design magazines, by visual analysis of pictures of home interiors up-loaded to databases of local real-estate agencies, and also by observations made at respondents' homes as well as the main sites of consumption, like markets, supermarkets and shops. The sample was composed of urban citizens divided into two main groups according to their natively spoken language – Ukrainian or Russian in the case of Ukraine and Estonian or Russian in the case of Estonia. The subgroup division was based on the age of respondents. In the first age category, there were informants born between 1940-1965, while in the second they were born between 1975-1990. The snowball recruitment method via social networks was used to find potential informants. The choice to have respondents from different language and age groups mirrors one of the targets of this research, which is to find as much variety as possible in the ways in which national belonging is recreated and expressed.

So far, ethnography has been considered to be the most appropriate instrument applied in studies of every-day life (De Certeau, 1984) and consumer culture (Miller, 1995; Ekström & Brembeck, 2004). In his several ethno-graphic studies of the potential impact of consumption on people's identity projects,



Daniel Miller (1987) concluded that consumption and possession of commodities not only expose social identities, but also stipulate their formation and re-negotiation. Since this research study's goal is to answer questions like how are national sentiments shaped at the mundane level? and what are those national symbols that people 'operate' in their everyday life?, the choice of eth-nography as the method of inquiry appears to be the most 'natural' one. First, in-depth interviews were chosen as the main method, however later, once I read through the transcripts of the first interviews, I realised that they represented rather 'dry' material that needed to be supplemented by additional data. Looking for a potential gap in the chosen methodology (which at that moment included semi-structured interviews and analysis of print advertisements) I started to look for a supplementary method. With more experience in interviews, I understood that there was definitely a need to better understand and feel the context, time and physical settings in which my data was collected. This encouraged me to 'use my eyes' more and to observe more closely the settings in which the research was done, namely at the informants' homes (whenever it was possible) and places of consumption. Even though it will be too ambitious to call this supplementary tool 'participant observation conducted as fully as possible', in its anthropological and sociological understanding, we believe that this type of observation deserves closer attention in studies of nationalism. This is also highlighted in the work of Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, p. 357), who argue that "Participant observation provides a window for viewing the nation in everyday life". Observing informants' homes or sites of consumption was helpful insofar as it revealed some details of the process of national identity formation that in general are difficult to notice when a more traditional approach to the study of national identity is applied. A home and the possessions it contains provide much information not only about the individual identity of their owner, but also about his/her group identity, and can provide evidence of how such an identity is recreated and maintained (Pechurina, 2015).

Another observation that I believe will be relevant to highlight for future studies on nationalism concerns the way in which a researcher might inquire about national sensibilities. In order to find unofficial national symbols that emerge and are 'operated' in the everyday life, or to learn about how people express their national portraits, one does not have to talk/ask about the nation explicitly. When the sense of national belonging is grounded in daily life, references to national categories come to the surface almost automatically at some point in a conversation (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). If such an approach is chosen, a researcher should listen and just wait until his/her informant starts to refer to a nation. For instance, while asking my Estonian informants about their individual preferences of their ideal home, several of them started their answer with, "We Estonians normally like private houses" or "...like an average Estonian, I would prefer to live in a private house". Even though the question was about individual preferences, respondents spontaneously evoked some kind of preferences they considered to be national, thereby identifying themselves as part of that nation. Following this approach, I presented my interview to informants first of all as a talk about everyday consumption practices, which would allow them to express their perception of the nation at any point of the interview. In particular in Ukraine, due to the context in which interviews were conducted (at the time of a notable escalation of nationalistic feelings because of Euromaidan and ongoing military events in Eastern Ukraine), usually there was no need to wait for long until an informant would start to make references to the nation or talk about their sense of national belonging. However, if after some time my informant had still not talked spontaneously in 'national terms', I would 'speed up' the process and bring up an issue of products that he/she might consider to have national meanings.

Both the researcher's role and identity might be affected by a change of settings during the research (Adler & Adler, 1987; Weinreb, 2006). Being a native Ukrainian had an obvious impact on my cultural and intuitive understanding of Ukraine, however, in the case of Lviv, it was not just that of an insider. There my position could be better described as those of an 'inside outsider'. First of all because in Lviv, which is usually considered to be a Ukrainian-speaking city and a cradle of Ukrainian nationalism, I was a representative of a Ukrainian Russian speaking community, coming originally from Kiev. Though



I am fluent in Ukrainian and conducted my interviews in Ukrainian and Russian languages (according to the needs of my informants), for native Ukrainian speakers, who usually have a very strong regional and municipal identity (Wylegala, 2010), I was seen more as an outsider who was observing and questioning them. For Russian speakers, sometimes my role of researcher-observer was turned into the role of researcher-comforter – a person ready to listen, share and understand concerns that could arise among members of a language minority group. I also experienced the same type of role when some respondents of a different language background shared with me how their everyday lives had changed since the events of Euromaidan and the military conflict in East-ern Ukraine. Usually such informants viewed me first of all as a compatriot that should have some pro-active civil position; indifference or neutrality was not looked upon favourably in such an emotional moment for Ukraine. In some interviews, their perception of the researcher as sympathetic with their feelings turned a relative 'easy' talk about everyday routine into long and emotional monologues, expressions of accumulated feelings, thoughts and fears concerning the Ukrainian nation, politics, perception of the 'other' and the war. In such moments, it seemed inappropriate to behave as a neutral observer – my Ukrainian identity was also awoken and I could feel not only empathy towards my respondents, but also I shared their fears, tragedies and anxiety about the future of Ukraine. Thus, in particular during the analysis of my data, I realised that reflections on my role as a researcher represent an important element or even source of data to be aware of while considering the results of my research.

People do not think about nationhood every day in every situation; it matters only in special contexts (Bru-baker et al., 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). The same applies to objects and practices through which people connect to these objects. Analysis of material objects and their consumption is limited to a specific context and a particular period of time. The change of context can modify the way people relate to, use and attribute meanings to objects and practices. Finally, objects become symbolically meaningful and can tell us something that goes beyond their basic function, only when studied within specific context (Julien & Rosselin, 2005). One of the most important features of the context in which my research was conducted is the fact that the period of data collection took place in 2014-2015, directly after the Euromaidan protests, the Crimean referendum and the beginning of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Entering the field, I was aware that while such events could make my interviews more emotionally sensitive, they could also facilitate my inquiries, since national sentiments were no longer dormant: people were more ready to talk about the nation, spontaneously charging even everyday conversations with national discourse.

The events of 2014-2015 provoked a renegotiation of national self-identification for many people, had an impact on the attitude toward national symbols, and significantly expanded their variety. In both the popular discourse and the academic one, this period was often described as a 'Ukrainian national revival' (Diuk, 2014; Kulyk, 2014). Against the backdrop of such an activation of nationalistic sentiments, one has to be careful while approaching the concept of the banal, as elements and behaviour patterns of the national identity production could be considered to be banal only for that particular period of Ukrainian history and thus represent an important limitation to my research. At the same time, it would be wrong to think that what manifested as banal in 2014-2015 cannot become a normality during subsequent years. Some material objects and consumption practices related to them acquired a new meaning, which I partially revealed in my study; they had become markers of Ukrainian-ness. Though such markers might change over time, I believe my research could still be useful for understanding the processes of how such markers could be shaped and 'operated' at the level of mundane life.

Physical settings in which I conducted interviews represented another important aspect in the process of finding the most appropriate method of data collection and later in its interpretation. While conducting interviews, I started to notice that interviews done in public premises were different from those conducted in the informants' homes. Interviews done at home provided me with richer data, as

homes were not just convenient places to conduct interviews; they constituted a meaningful part of settings studied in my research (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). In particular, I was able to complement the home-related part of my interview with an observation of the home's material culture.

Here it would be important to revisit the necessity of being self-reflexive and consider changes in my own national identity, which were provoked by the context in which my research was done. Being in some sense 'activated' and renegotiated, my feelings towards Ukraine made me pay more attention to material things with Ukrainian symbolism even outside of my research. Exploring how my respondents attach national meanings to some objects from their routine life, I was simultaneously reflecting on the ways I might do the same. Similarly to Tolia-Kelly's research (2004) on British Asian homes, in my case, interviews conducted in home settings were more than just a conversation in a more relaxed atmosphere for my respondent. Usually they also included a tour of the home, which was in itself valuable for my research, and an experience of being treated as a guest (I was always offered drinks and snacks). When observing informants' homes, I looked everywhere for objects that could be significant for the informants' national identity, and after identifying at least one, I would usually try to provoke some talk about it and observe whether its description – or practices associated with it – referred to any national sentiments. Such participant observation started to lend me insight into how a nation gets materialised through objects that surround people in their habitual spaces of everyday life. The opportunity of being at home often encouraged my respondents to show me some of their deco-rative possessions embodied with special symbolic meaning, thus making our interviews more interactive. While holding an object in their hands, they would tell its story, describe their attitude towards it and very often also mention how it connected them with local culture.

The experience of interviewing at homes also revealed a difference between Russian and Ukrainian speakers in attitudes towards objects with Ukrainian national symbolism. For instance, I found that while home aesthetics were usually shared between both language groups and constituted codes of Ukrainian taste, the attitudes toward some objects with national meanings were never homogeneous. Russian speakers would value having objects that are 'rep-resentative of Ukrainian culture' and would consider them important for their identity. In their homes, such objects were normally represented by art works, traditional Ukrainian embroideries, national costumes and ceramics. I noticed the same objects in the homes of Ukrainian speakers; however, in most cases they were not mentioned by their owners as the main representations of the Ukrainian nation. For such purposes, the majority of Ukrainian speakers preferred to show either official symbols or more nationalist ones (usually not shared by Russian speakers) like the UPA flag, a portrait of Taras Shevchenko and religious icons. I also observed that people from different language groups might use the same object differently. A piece of a traditional Ukrainian embroidery was admired and proudly showed to me by a Russian speaker, while my Ukrainian respondent had it folded and safely stored away, saving it for a special occasion; that piece represented almost a sacred object to her.

According to the principles of material culture studies, objects are used as lenses to study cultural meanings that they can reveal or mediate (Douglas, 2002; Julien & Rosselin, 2005). While focusing on how home possessions re-lated to a sense of Ukrainian identity, sometimes I would notice objects that had some clear national features, but which my respondent would not mention in our conversation. On the one hand, it may indicate that there was a lack of as-sociation between that object and national self-perception. On the other hand, I suggest that it could also signify that the object was so grounded in everyday life that its owner would not reflect on its national meanings. Nonetheless, the fact of living with it would have an impact on one's national identity. Examples of such objects are those functional ones, like cosmetics made in Ukraine, Ukrainian music CDs or books, but also maps or images of Ukrainian landscapes hanging on the walls. Among those, only books were attributed some national meanings. These are objects, however, with which people have contact on a daily basis, as such, they constitute domestic practices, being meaningful only to some particular culture

(Pechurina, 2015). That culture dictates a unity of tastes, some aesthetic norms for fashion, home arrangement, and cooking; in the end, people who consider themselves to be part of that cultural community share those tastes to a greater or lesser extent.

My primary interest in this research was to explore and document how national identity is shaped and expressed by ordinary people. Though I realise that my sample of 'ordinary people' is not representative and in itself poses a significant limitation to my study, I strongly believe that the exploration of national identity through the lens of everyday consumption practices could provide a supplementary picture of a major socio-political process such as the formation of a nation. The details that a domain of mundane life can provide for a better understanding of how nations are shaped and consolidated never lie on the 'surface', which requires the researcher to be, apart from systematic and consistent in his/her approach to research, also flexible and reflexive in order to reveal them (Gouldner, 1971; Stanley & Wise, 1983). In this research, applying a mix of methods, regularly revising the initial methodology design, listening to my emotions and intuition, and paying attention to physical and temporal settings of research all helped me to highlight those nuances of national identity formation that are usually overlooked in more traditional inquiries focused on conceiving and reacting to national policies.

## Study 2

### The study of national identity through musical performances in Estonia

Based on the multifaceted and bottom-up approach to identity, this section presents a study of identity and nation-building through collective musical performances. It presents music as a potent area of research where meanings of nationhood are negotiated but also practiced in national celebrations, as well as in leisure time and hobby groups. The case under study is the national tradition of choral singing in Estonia. There is a similar choral singing culture in Latvia and Lithuania, yet I had lived in Estonia before and had some basic language competence, which decidedly influenced my choice of the case and facilitated the depth of insight I could obtain. In studies of nationalism, scholars have investigated mostly classical music and folk music, two genres that traditionally represented national cultures and were often incorporated in national narratives (Curtis, 2008; Bohlman, 2011; Baycroft & Hopkin, 2012). A new, growing body of research investigates national meanings in popular music (Biddle & Knight, 2007; Connell & Gibson, 2003; Johnson, 2006). In my research, I shifted attention from meanings in musical pieces (lyrics, contexts, authors) to music from the perspective of participation and everyday life. I focused on the participation, performance and narratives of conductors, as well as ordinary members of amateur choirs. I tried to understand how the experience of collective musical performance rather than only the musical piece itself links to one's sense of belonging. In other words, contrary to the assumption that music reflects social identities and values, I was interested in how music and musical performances create what they claim to reflect (Frith, 1996). This stance was crucial, as it posed a question of not only what we can read from music about the discourse of nationhood, but more importantly, how music can actively contribute to or challenge the process of nation-building.

The tradition of choral singing festivals can be described as an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) that accompanied Estonian nation-building. It was started by nationally minded intellectuals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, 50 years before the first republic of Estonia was established (cf. Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2014; Šmidchens, 2014;). The festival is organised every five years and features only choral pieces performed by amateur choirs from all over the country and abroad (usually choirs established by Estonians outside of Estonia). The choral repertoires feature old national songs, some rearranged folk songs and newly commissioned choral pieces. It is a celebration that engages

about 20,000 singers, with more than 100,000 in the audience participating physically on the festival grounds (which amounts to 10% of the total population). Even more people watch it on TV. The song festival is accompanied by a dance festival that takes place simultaneously.

The festival and choral singing were part of the social mobilisation against the Soviet regime in the late eighties, the so-called 'Singing Revolution'. The name, used in both academic and everyday speech, expresses the mythical importance of singing as a way of expressing 'Estonianness', solidarity, and the common political wish for Estonians to have their own democratic state. As Lauristin and Vihalemm (2013) showed in their survey, the majority of Estonians express very normative statements about the festival – it is an 'authentic' celebration of the Estonian nation. Some of my informants named the tradition a religion for many Estonians who are otherwise not usually religious. The participation in the celebration decreased after Estonia regained independence, but since the early 2000s the trend has changed and the song celebration attracts even more people. It is estimated that about 12% of adult Estonians currently sing in choirs and 46% have done so in the past (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2013, p. 9). My task was thus to explore the phenomenon of the song celebration and choral singing from the perspective of nation-building in contemporary Estonia, in the context of 25 years of independence. I was interested in how this kind of musical performance, both the national festival and participation in choirs in leisure time, both influences people's perception of nationhood and helps some of the national narratives be more pronounced in their everyday lives.

I came to Estonia in 2014, the year when the national festival took place. The focus on participatory and social aspects of music led me to choose qualitative methods with the emphasis on in-depth interviews as well as participation and observation of choral events. My initial fieldwork consisted of an analysis of the festival official communication, interviews with decision-makers, namely representatives of state institutions and organisations responsible for the festival, analysis of media representations as well as the use of the festival in the context of nation-branding. In-depth interviews of at least one hour provided insights into the decision-makers' perceptions of the song celebration. They clearly revealed a kind of 'normalcy', namely what discourses are considered self-evident in the circle of the festival organisers and top conductors. The prevailing discourse reflected the rather ethnocentric, sometimes anti-Russian narrative of Estonian nationalism. Yet, the informants, even if some of them worked for state agencies that coordinate the song festival, saw themselves not only as representatives of state institutions but also (or in some cases, most of all) as musicians, conductors, cultural sector workers, singers, composers, music teachers, Estonians, patriots, Russians, Russian Estonians, etc. Their identities and reference groups shifted during our conversations and interviews; sometimes they expressed seemingly contradictory opinions that depended on the context. For example, one of the top conductors and organisers of the song celebration insisted that the song festival is a celebration of the nation, its mentality, and its rootedness in the region – yet he opposed the political overtones of the event:

*If you take nationality away, then the mentality is still there, if you take mentality away, what does this na-tionality mean then? It's nothing. Take the flag, yes and so what? [irritation] You can put another flag here [laughter], it's kind of a form or surface.*

Concurrently, he saw the abundance of state flags at the event as a normal need for expressing the Estonians' national confidence. This example shows that the divide into formal and informal (top or bottom) actors in the nation-building process is perhaps analytically useful but problematic in practice. Even those who represent state institutions constantly negotiate their identities, challenge the official discourses and shift their positions and alliances depending on the interview situation. It might, therefore, be useful to think of the formal-informal dichotomy not as a binary division, but rather as a continuum where many actors will hold ambiguous positions.

One of the most interesting interviews took place during the song festival. I was invited to follow the day of one middle school choir and accompany their choir leader. This person led me through each step of rehearsals and narrated to me her own as well as the choir's preparations and activities as they 'naturally' unfolded in the context of the festival. Her commentary on the events I witnessed provided me with insight into how she frames singing in her own experience and where the experience of national identity appears most strongly. These casual, fragmented and unstructured conversations revealed that most of the time the sense of national belonging is not explicitly expressed or highlighted by the informants. Rather, it is a wider frame of reference, something taken for granted that is often 'forced' in the interview. During the festival, some of the members of the choir I accompanied asked me if 'we' in Poland (my country of origin) know about 'their' tradition of singing and that 'they' are the biggest choir in the world. This situation showed how my research activity and my identity as a foreigner evoked in them certain national categorisations and performances of identity. My presence at the song festival grounds encouraged the informants to frame the choral singing festival as something specifically Estonian that I, as an outsider and a representative of another nation, might not be familiar with. Such encounters during ethnographic fieldwork and interviewing pose the question to what extent research activity that employs intrusive methods can be called another banal form of evoking thinking in national terms (cf. Adams, 2009).

At the next stage of choosing informants, I applied the strategy of exposure (Shea-Schwartz & Yanow, 2012). Namely, I tried to find respondents that could potentially represent different points of view or even contradictory narratives. This included identifying 'types' of respondents, according to their position within the structure of the festival, experience in different regions of Estonia, age, musical activities, professional experience, etc. Some of my previous respondents directed me to people whom they thought of as worth talking to and considered influential or controversial. The strategy of exposure is neither randomised, nor theoretically-driven. The selection of informants is an ongoing process, closely tied to what has already been discovered. I found this particular method crucial in the study of bottom-up national identity. It leaves the sample of interviews open and flexible, it prioritises fieldwork findings over methodological formality and, therefore, enhances the possibility of discovering aspects of identity creation and negotiation that are more complex, novel or marginalised in previous studies.

In my research, the methodological choice of using exposure as a way to identify informants and diversify narratives resulted in interesting findings with theoretical insights. I found out that there are many fractures in the national narrative. Some interviewees said that even though the festival is great, it is perhaps too conservative and marginalises the presence of Estonian Russians. Others suggested that the festival is too archaic and should connect people over civic patriotism, rather than repeat old nationalist narratives. Altogether, I identified several narratives of what kind of national identity the song celebration conveys or should convey. These were rather marginalised in previous studies, which emphasised the 'self-evident' role of the song celebration as the Estonian cultural symbol related to the independence movement.

The second methodological pillar of the study was participant observation. I participated in several choral singing events, yet the most informative one was the national song festival in 2014. I documented the event with photographs, short videos and field notes, like the one below.

*People came with blankets, food, it was like a family picnic, no alcohol, everybody rather focused on what's happening on the stage. The event was opened by President Ilves, who said that 'freedom is our song, we have always sung, no matter what, when we were occupied, for our freedom and now when we are free, he finished with 'Elagu Eesti'. The crowd applauded. Then the emotional moments came – the national anthem and some songs of the Singing Revolution were sung. People stood up, waved small national flags, and sang along. A woman next to me grabbed my hand, it was a very bonding moment. An elderly lady behind me was so moved when the national anthem was sung, I saw tears on her face.*

*Everybody was very focused, it felt like they came here for these very few meaningful songs... My Estonian friend whispered in my ear "This is the song!" when 'Koit' (Dawn) was sung; upon the request of the people the song was repeated. It was very empowering and powerful to see thousands of people do the same thing, wave the flag, move rhythmically like one body, some of them holding hands. I also had a flag and for the first time in my life, I actually waved it... When it got dark, people took out their mobile phones and held them in the air (like lighters at rock concerts) to signal the most emotional and sentimental songs. (Author's fieldwork journal, 6.07.2014)*

This experience illustrates the idea that identity is not only declared but also performed and practiced. It made me realise that most accounts of identity or nation-building focus on stories, on how people narrate where they belong. This is a fundamentally important approach, yet it does not address what lies beyond the word: those aspects of identity that link, for example, to affect, body and action. The festival was a kind of 'maximum' experience, an ecstatic event of collective joy that manifests when people go beyond their selves in order to be part of something greater (a kind of Turner's *communitas*, see Turner, 1966). The moment of joint singing of patriotic songs, which was a symbolic re-enactment of the nation, drew my attention to emotive aspects of national identity which are usually invisible in a top-down approach to nation-building. Although the body of research on the social aspects of emotions is growing (Ahmed, 2004; Rosenwein, 2007; Wetherell, 2012, 2015), in nationalism studies emotions have been noticed but not thoroughly researched as mechanisms of collective identity building (cf. Gellner, 1997), sometimes omitted as uncanny or associated with uncontrolled outbursts of hatred and ethnic violence (Druckman, 1994). Michael Skey (2006) suggested that surpluses of emotion at national events – what he calls 'ecstatic nationalism' – can be seen as an ex-tension of Billig's banal nationalism. He argues that they 'both illuminate and materialize the often rather nebulous solidarities that are presumed to underpin daily (national) life' (Skey, 2006, p. 146). Skey sees ecstatic events as somewhat interrupting the banal routine of nationalism, yet my analysis of the song celebration and choral singing revealed two major things about emotions and identity. First, emotional outbursts can be expected and somewhat learned and ritualised. In the context of the song festival, the audience is very familiar with the emotional load that the songs carry (everyone learns those songs at school) and expects the ritual to be emotional. This suggests that emotions are not uncanny, but rather constructed discursively, affectively and performatively within a cultural context (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012, 2015). Second, the emotive aspect of identity is not extraordinary or limited to one single event. It also lies in everyday speech, in how people frame and talk about their sense of belonging. This experience alerted me to discourses of feeling and emotive vocabulary that came up in interviews and the emotional reactions of my informants. It made me notice, for instance, how some of the interviewees said they feel Estonian and placed their hand on their heart when describing their experiences of singing at the song festival. Sometimes the body communicated a stronger or a different message than words.

The systematic observation and inquiry into emotional states of informants has become part of the interview-ing process and also brought up further methodological questions, such as how to research and write about emotions in the social sciences. For a long time, the ideal research position was the one of an emotionally detached, most neutral observer. This was sustained by a philosophical position, which separated judgment and emotion and made the latter one inferior. This assumption has been challenged in the field of anthropology but seems to prevail in academic standards of other disciplines, including the study of nation-building and national identity in political science. There is, however, a growing body of literature that argues that emotional introspection is a way of knowing and generating knowledge (Davies & Spencer, 2010; Munkejord, 2009;). Brannick and Coghlan (2007) argue for a process of reflexive awareness in order to unlock tacit knowledge that may be reframed as theoretical knowledge. Munkejord (2009) suggests that emotional reflexivity improves trustworthiness and transparency of research. In my research, attempts to relate to my informants emotionally and



understand my own emotional reactions (moments of distance, compassion, repulsion, or an urge to act, like wave the flag on the song festival) were very informative. Emotions are not easily transcribed into notes and then an academic text, which is usually fragmented, condensed and adjusted to standards of journals and academic audience(s). Yet, they play a significant role in the way people create and experience their identities and also in how researchers study them, which is altogether a strong reason to incorporate reflection and questions about emotions into the theory and practice of researching informal, invisible aspects of nation-building and group identity formation.

This short reflection of my study aimed to show that music (from national celebrations to everyday hobby) is fertile ground for researching the informal, implicit aspects of the sense of belonging. It is culturally embedded, it engages people on many levels – discursively, emotionally, etc. – and traverses their leisure time. The study of the song celebration and choral singing in Estonia also revealed that a significant component of national belonging rests on participation, collective acts and the sense of emotional attachment to the imaginary national community. It showed how new theoretical insights into identity can be developed by investigating what is usually left beyond academic research – the emotional states of the respondents and emotive aspects of identity discourse. This is especially valid for the post-Soviet area, since most of the accounts of nation-building focused on administrative and institutional decisions related to language or citizenship. In my research, I realised the relevance of looking into how people feel about and perform the nation in most culturally significant contexts, such as the national song festival, which is closer to the experience of ordinary people than policies and main political actors.

## Conclusions

The goal of the paper was to elaborate methodological approaches to the study of nation-building and national identity in the context of everyday life. It focused particularly on the study of mundane, unnoticed practices related to identity in the context of the post-Soviet region, in which scholarship on informality and the mundane exists, but has not been explicitly linked to wider processes of nation-building. The paper attempted to demonstrate the relevance of research into informal, everyday life experiences and practices in the search for a better explanation of the process of nation-building, identity formation, its failures and successes. Using the example of consumption practices in Ukraine, as well as musical practices in Estonia, the paper aimed to problematise certain aspects of interviewing such as informality, intrusiveness, interview setting, and exposure as a strategy of sampling. It also presented some useful aspects of anthropological sensitivity through which both tangible proxies of identity (meaningful objects, products, private space) and intangible aspects such as affective practices can be revealed. Finally, the article provided some reflections on the positionality and identity of the researcher in the field, in particular, the usefulness of emotional reflexivity as a research tool that complements, rather than disturbs analysis and interpretation.

These methodological propositions do not form a new coherent methodology; they should be read rather as a set of ideas about how to practically approach identity formation in the context of everyday life. In the era of growing codification of research methods, this paper aims to re-emphasise some modes of learning about identity that are absent in the mainstream literature on identity formation. With this highly interpretive, ethnographic approach we hope to understand national identity as a nuanced, embodied experience, intertwined with many aspects of everyday life. Through the exploration of national meanings in the banal, routine, and self-evident, we hope to shed new light on how and why certain top-down decisions and policies related to nation-building solve or do not solve identity challenges. The post-Soviet and more widely, post-socialist countries, with already 25 years of new national history, are a perfect 'laboratory' to research tensions and dependencies between the macro and micro, public and private, top-down and bottom-up aspects of identity.



Although the focus on the everyday construction of identities might bring a lot of insight about particular and general mechanisms of identity construction, as any approach, it has limitations. The concept of the everyday or banal is never fixed; it is not uniform, as it does not have well-defined borders. However, as shown in the example of Ukraine, in certain political situations the banal aspects of nationalism, previously invisible, can be easily mobilised and become very pronounced. Another difficulty of research into everyday practices is their richness and even 'messiness'. After all, nation as a cognitive scheme is always intertwined with different group identities and ideologies and cannot be neatly singled out or measured. This poses a challenge to traditional concepts of reliability and validity of such research, yet, we argue that the richness and complexity of data, as well as a methodological flexibility of looking at it, extends the context of discovery and may generate new theoretical insights. We hope that as the bottom-up research into nation-building is gaining ground, further methodological reflection about it will develop and contribute to better understanding the limits, strengths and applicability of such an approach in the post-socialist context and beyond.

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