Young people in Latvia and Georgia: identity formation and the imprints of traditions and globalization

Tamar Khoshtaria, Tinatin Zurabishvili, Alina Romanovska & Dustin Gilbreath

Published online: 13 Dec 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

Article views: 793

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Young people in Latvia and Georgia: identity formation and the imprints of traditions and globalization

Tamar Khoshtaria[a], Tinatin Zurabishvili[b], Alina Romanovska[c] and Dustin Gilbreath[d]

[a]Senior Researcher at Caucasus Research Resource Center - Georgia (CRRC - Georgia), Tbilisi, Georgia and Assistant Professor at School of Arts and Sciences, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia; [b]Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy; [c]Researcher at Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Daugavpils University, Daugavpils, Latvia; [d]Deputy Research Director at Caucasus Research Resource Center - Georgia (CRRC - Georgia), Tbilisi, Georgia

ABSTRACT

Youth in the post-Soviet countries have faced the challenges of identity formation in concomitance with the processes of state-building in newly independent states. This paper focuses on young people aged 14 to 19 in seemingly different post-Soviet countries, Georgia and Latvia, who grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union in independent countries striving towards Europe and its values. Based on qualitative interviews conducted in schools for the <#funding-source;>Horizon 2020</#funding-source;> CHIEF project, the paper discusses some aspects of young people's identity formation, and how they see themselves in national and European contexts. Along with some similarities evident in both countries, such as young people reporting a very strong sense of national belonging and identity, the data also show important differences when it comes to young people's perceptions of Europe in Latvia and Georgia, as the latter report some reluctance in regards to accepting European identity and values.

Introduction

Researchers have shown a significant amount of interest in the identity formation of young people, particularly as relates the effects of globalization (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Theories around young people's national identities in the modern period have often pointed to changing, multiple, diverse, or hybrid identities. It can be argued that youth in former Soviet republics have faced particularly challenging identity formation processes stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting state building processes in the newly independent countries (Blum, 2007). While there is an increasing academic interest in post-Soviet youth (e.g. Roberts & Fagan, 1999; Walker & Stephenson, 2010), to date, there has been little exploration of how youth in the former Soviet space see their place in the world.

This paper contributes to filling the above gap based on qualitative interviews conducted for the <#funding-source;>Horizon 2020</#funding-source;> project Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future (CHIEF)[1] in selected public schools in two post-Soviet countries, Georgia and Latvia. While today's adolescents are expected to be largely free of the Soviet cultural heritage, Georgia and Latvia share important commonalities in their recent history, the effects of which would be unlikely to disappear in a single generation.

Both countries experienced periods of rather strong national revival in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Young people in Latvia and Georgia find themselves growing up at the crossroads of highly cherished 'ancient' local traditions, diverse remnants from the Soviet past, and

very powerful contemporary cultural influences, mostly via different forms of mass media from the Western world. This study contributes to understanding how young people position themselves in this complex, globalized context, which cultural sphere(s) they tend to identify with, and why. It asks, specifically, whether young people feel conflicted when it comes to their perceptions of self, or if they find ways to develop their identities in a harmonious manner, finding the cultural sphere(s) they identify with most.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, major theories of identity formation are discussed. The next section describes the data collection process. It is followed by an overview of the contexts in which today's teenagers are socialized in Georgia and Latvia. The paper then presents findings from qualitative interviews conducted with young people. The paper ends with a conclusion and discussion, which frames the findings in the prism of theories of identity formation.

Theoretical framework

The complexity of the process of identity formation cannot be underestimated. Among many other characteristics, identities can be based on one's self-perception as, primarily, 'citizens of the world', or 'sons/daughters of one's country' or a smaller regional/local community. Researchers' interest in the development of global, national, and/or regional identities and the sense of belonging is high (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015; Jones, 2000; Keating, 1997; Khondker, 2005, 2005; Paasi, 2003; Runce, 2013; Said, 1985; Steger, 2014; Szeman, 2013). Studies of identity are often accompanied with an analysis of the post-colonial situation. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) assert that the post-colonial crisis of identity is related to the problematic relationship between self and place. An open information space, wide-ranging opportunities for mobility, and the internet can change people's views of themselves and their place in the world. Since the connection between a person and place of residence, or provenance, in the consciousness is very strong, globalization may cause a crisis of identification, resulting in the emergence of hybrid or multiple identities (Kaša & Mieriņa, 2019; Romanovska, 2019). These include coexistence and interactions of various geographic (local, regional, transnational, global), as well as cultural (e.g. various ethnic groups or various religious denominations) 'layers'.

The development of one's identity is an individual process, susceptible to numerous societal influences, especially at a young age. The years of adolescence are a particularly important and intense stage of identity formation (Koroļeva et al., 2009). The complex and long-lasting interplay of different agents of socialization result in one's perception of oneself. These perceptions, however, are never final, as they continue to evolve, with varying intensity, throughout a lifetime. During turbulent historical periods, identity formation is even more complex, and may lead to confusion or even conflicted perceptions (Levi, 2007).

The existing literature suggests that periods of state-building and the (re-)construction of independent states pose specific challenges to identity formation or development, as many habitual frames of reference disappear along with the shifting physical and mental borders. Seemingly personal processes of identity formation and all but personal developments in local and global politics heavily influence one another (Virkkunen, 1999). Adults need, at best, to re-adjust their understanding of the world(s) around them, while children must learn to navigate a previously unknown reality. This is the case for the first generations of post-Soviet children who could no longer rely on the previous generations' experiences and their understandings of cultural, national, and political spaces. In addition, they found themselves under the influence of the previously unimaginable intensity of online cultural influences, originating from elsewhere in the world. On the one hand, new (physical) state borders delineated smaller, more homogeneous spaces and communities. On the other hand, the virtual, communicative borders literally ceased to exist. Young people, including those living in Georgia and Latvia, found themselves belonging to smaller countries, but, also, to the entire world.

Both Latvian and Georgian researchers emphasize the dynamic nature of the process of identity formation (e.g. Ozoliņa, 2016; Rozenvalds & Zobena, 2014). Emerging national discourses in the 1990s inevitably had a strong impact on the processes of identity formation (Kaprāns & Zelče, 2010;

see also Nodia, 2009; Rozenvalds & Zobena, 2014; Zedania, 2011). A particularly challenging question at present concerns interactions of national and European identities, and young people's sense of belonging to national and/or European domains. The former refers to an individual's affiliation to a national (as opposed to regional or local) community, and at the same time, is identified through relations with other countries and societies (Rozenvalds & Zobena, 2014).

Previous studies conducted in Latvia have shown that the Russian-speaking population of the country tends to have rather specific attitudes towards historical events, and also is characterized by lower interest and acceptance of the Latvian culture. Research on the identity of national minorities (especially Russian-speakers) often raises the issue of societal security. Researchers recognize that continuous communication among the different communities and acceptance of the multiplicity of identities is the only tool that will assist in overcoming the existing stereotypes and misconceptions, to foster a coherent society which, ultimately, will enhance social security (Ozoliņa, 2016).

Youth studies in particular, suggest dual, sometimes contradictory aspirations of young people towards the national/traditional, and, at the same time, towards modern, 'western' values (Tsuladze, 2012). According to Tsuladze, many young people in Georgia have combined western and Georgian culture (Tsuladze, 2011). Importantly, perceptions of the 'West', and the level of acceptance of western values have the potential to become a social divide in any post-Soviet society, following the long history of anti-western propaganda of the Cold War period.

Both in Latvia and Georgia, academic research focused on the processes of identity formation may have important social implications. It is believed to be instrumental in stabilizing domestic political processes, as well as ensuring better integration of national minorities, thus promoting social cohesion (e.g. Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 2010). To a significant extent, young people's sense of (geographic) belonging may influence each countries' development during the decades to come.

Data collection

The findings presented in this paper are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with young people aged 14 to 19 living in Georgia and Latvia. In Georgia, the fieldwork was carried out by the research organization CRRC-Georgia,[2] and in Latvia by the Daugavpils University.[3]

Three secondary schools open for collaboration with the CHIEF project were identified per country, including one in a metropolitan city, one in a smaller urban settlement, and one in a village. Relatively large schools (with over 100 students in the upper grades) were selected. Sixty student interviews were conducted in each country (20 interviews per school).

While it proved to be challenging to interview ethnic minority students in Georgia, in Latvia, a fair number of ethnic Russian and Polish students were interviewed, in addition to ethnic Latvians. This was possible as the selected schools in the smaller urban settlement and a village are located in the Latgale region. The ethnic composition of the region's population differs from that of the rest of the country, as there is a smaller proportion of Latvians (46.0%) and a larger proportion of ethnic minorities (38.9% Russian, 6.8% Polish, 4.9% Belarusian, and 3.4% other ethnicities)[4] Researchers note that the regional identity in contemporary Latvian society is especially pronounced in Latgale, which has its own language (Runce, 2013). The dominant religion is Catholicism, while in the rest of Latvia, Protestantism is more common.

In Latvia, the fieldwork took place from February through May, 2019. The interviews were conducted in Latvian, with some ethnic Russian and Polish informants making occasional comments in their native languages.[5] In Georgia, all interviews were conducted in Georgian, in April and May, 2019.

Full ethical review of the CHIEF project was conducted prior to its commencement. The study in Georgia and Latvia followed the ethic's guidelines of CHIEF project's coordinator (Aston University, UK). The CHIEF project was reviewed and approved by Aston University's School of Languages and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Additionally, the research in both countries was subjected to ethical review by the institutions carrying out the study in Latvia and Georgia. CRRC-

Georgia strictly adheres to international ethical research standards and follows codes of ethics of international research associations (e.g. The Code of Professional Ethics and Practices by American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)).[6] In Latvia, the study was reviewed by Daugavpils University Research Ethics Committee Regulations.

In both countries, school administrations were involved in helping to recruit students. To the extent possible, gender and age balance was maintained. Students' willingness to participate in the study played a very important role in their selection. Young people willing to participate in the study were given information sheets and consent forms which they had to sign prior to the interviews. Students under the age of 18 were given information sheets and consent forms for their parents/ guardians to read and sign before the interviews.

The same discussion guide was used in both countries, with minor country-specific adjustments. Among other topics, the questions addressed the issues of young people's identity, self-perception, and attitudes towards different cultural spheres. Immediately after each interview, interviewers made notes on general observations on the interview settings, process, and the informant's interest and attitude.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis. All transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis, with all information that could potentially identify the informant being removed from the document and random pseudonyms assigned to the informants. The transcripts were coded in NVivo.

When coding the data, an inductive method was used. The interview transcripts and interviewers' notes were analysed using the grounded theory approach summarized by Charmaz (1996). This approach implies focusing on the information collected during fieldwork, without pre-existing analytical models and assumptions. This makes it possible to first look at the content and, at a later stage, 'generate ideas that may later be verified through traditional logico-deductive methods' (Charmaz, 1996, p. 48).

While the data is not nationally representative, it provides analysis of the students' understandings, perceptions and cultural practices. Importantly for the focus of this paper, issues of cultural heritage, traditions and innovation in culture, national and European 'belongingness', and young people's self-understandings were discussed at length during the interviews.

Post-Soviet Georgia and Latvia: the context

Before looking at how young people in Latvia and Georgia see themselves, and which cultural space(s) they feel closest to, this section provides a short overview of the situation in the two countries.

In the early 1990s, while globalization was accelerating, the populations of post-Soviet countries re-emphasized national culture and identities that previously were often overshadowed by the construct of the 'common' Soviet identity. Nevertheless, national self-consciousness has always been very strong in Georgia. Ilia Chavchavadze's[7] 'triad' of the dearest treasures to Georgians – fatherland, Georgian language, and faith (Orthodox Christianity) – is universally familiar in Georgia, and repeatedly quoted in numerous contexts to this day. Unlike most of the Soviet republics, even during the toughest years of the Soviet Union, Georgian language continued to be the main national language in the Republic (Whitney, 1978, April 18).[8]

Regaining independence after over seven decades of Sovietization proved to be a difficult challenge in Georgia, as the country's economic and energy systems collapsed. In many respects, the country is struggling to this day. Ethnic conflicts in the early 1990s resulted in breakaway or occupied territories, and massive flows of internally displaced persons that the country did not have the resources to help adequately. Long-lasting hardships led to disenchantment with the political class, with young people being the least engaged in elections (CRRC-Georgia (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Georgia), 2020[9] At the same time, the images of 'glorious past' became increasingly important in the national discourse, often referring to the 12th century 'golden age' of Georgia which is praised throughout the national history curricula (Khoshtaria et al., 2018; Uçarol et al., 2019).

Modern-day Georgia is characterized by a stagnant economy, high unemployment and under-employment, a dream to restore the country's territorial unity, massive intra-regional and rural/urban disparities, deep rooted paternalistic attitudes, and low tolerance towards non-mainstream behaviour. Yet, numerous survey findings suggest that the majority of the public aspires to EU membership, hoping it can help improve population's well-being and living conditions in Georgia. However, survey findings also show that actual knowledge of the EU is rather limited and has not improved over time, despite official information campaigns and large-scale exposure to information about the EU (Zurabishvili, 2019).

Both Georgia and Latvia have always been multicultural societies. Both countries were occupied for significant periods of their history. Nevertheless, both Latvians and Georgians managed to preserve their ethnic and cultural values.

The history of the 20th century heavily influences contemporary Latvian identity. Events such as the Soviet occupation, deportations, World War II, and the restoration of national independence play an important role in people's identities and are vividly preserved in people's memory. Often, these events presented threats to Latvian culture and the nation. Speaking of the Soviet period in particular, researchers note that the content of education and limited access to information resulted in an incomplete picture of the richness and diversity of Latvian culture. In turn, this had an impact on young people's sense of national awareness (Eglīte, 2011; see also Saleniece, 2005). During the Soviet period, large numbers of immigrants from other Soviet republics settled in Latvia, and, often, formed their communities, isolated from the local population (Eglīte & Mežs, 2002; Zvidriņš & Vanovska, 1992). In 1989, ethnic Latvians accounted for only 52% of the population of the republic, compared to 75% in 1935 (Zvidriņš, 2021.). The Soviet period weakened people's sense of belonging to Latvia, reduced their participation in social processes, and created a basis for the Latvian-Russian ethnic conflicts of today (Apine, 2008).

Since the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1990, the government has promoted campaigns aimed at the enhancement of national identity, as one of the most important goals of state-building. Latvian culture and language are viewed as integral parts of a diverse European culture (Vides aizsardzības un reģionālās attīstības ministrija, 2010), and play a role in preserving cultural diversity in Europe.

Findings

Sense of 'belonging'

In post-Soviet Georgia and Latvia, children and young people were, and are still exposed to various propaganda campaigns that aim at strengthening their national awareness, and that aim to put these countries back on the world map as autonomous entities.[10] The same was true for the informants interviewed within the CHIEF project. Schools often play a role in these campaigns, especially when it comes to teaching subjects like history, geography, and languages (Uçarol et al., 2019). In this context, and in spite of numerous global influences, especially through popular social networks, the countries' national culture, in its broadest sense, often becomes the basis of young people's primary identity. Importantly, it provides them with a sense of pride, security, and belonging. The interviewed young people recognized that their national culture was very important to them. They placed a special emphasis on the national language: 'I can speak no other language as well as I can speak Latvian, and I don't feel as comfortable speaking any other language as I feel speaking Latvian. It's my language, and the language of my family members' (Ciba, female, urban school, Latvia).

The informants interviewed in Latvia saw fluency in Latvian language as one of the most important conditions of being a Latvian. Regardless of ethnicity, young people pointed out that it is important not only to speak Latvian, but also to keep the language 'pure' and not 'contaminate' it with foreign words or internationalisms. Rather, they felt it was important to use Latvian equivalents instead.

Young people interviewed in Georgia also stressed the high importance of their language: 'I am part of my culture, as I speak Georgian. It is very good that we, Georgians, have our own language, and my Georgian culture is expressed when I am speaking Georgian' (Elene, female, rural school, Georgia).

When asked what it means to be a Latvian, young people in Latvia emphasized the importance of national self-awareness. This awareness often presupposes pride in one's country, its culture, and traditions. This is not only a passive awareness, but is also expressed in behaviour:

> A Latvian is aware that s/he is Latvian. S/he attends various cultural events. S/he is proud of her/his [Latvian] language. No matter how reprehensible the Latvian government ... is, s/he still belongs to Latvia, and knows that this is his/her real home forever, and s/he will always feel good, accepted, and understood here. (Anna, female, urban school, Latvia)

Young Georgian informants, similar to Latvians, also reported they were proud to be Georgian, and saw themselves first and foremost as Georgians. European or 'global' belonging was either absent, or extremely weak.

In both countries, informants highlighted the importance of knowing their culture and preserving traditions. The latter expectation was especially pronounced in Georgia, where the importance of passing on traditions to future generations was emphasized.[11] For example, one respondent stated:

> My culture is my country's culture, which is very old and very valuable for me, and I would gladly contribute to keeping and cherishing it, because it is the greatest wealth, which we should keep for the future generations. < ... > I am very proud of it. (Tsisana, female, 19, rural school, Georgia).

When talking about Georgian culture, young informants mostly linked it with history and traditions that date back many centuries, and mostly related to Georgian feasts and hospitality (e.g. family and friends gatherings, folklore, food, and wine).

Some informants in Georgia were worried, however, that their peers may not be able to preserve Georgian traditions, as new cultural values, coming from the West, are becoming dominant: 'We are moving towards American and European cultures, towards modern culture. I like all of that, but I also think that we should not lose whatever is ours' (Sopho, female, semi urban school, Georgia).

Although young people in Latvia also believed that traditional Latvian culture should be preserved, their own interests were mostly related to contemporary Latvian and foreign culture, and particularly music and sports. Importantly, they considered the works of traditional culture and literature to be difficult to comprehend, although they did not challenge their importance. Gregors went as far as stating: 'We're not interested in [traditional] culture, although we are aware of its value and we respect it' (Gregors, male, urban school, Latvia). Thus, the data suggest certain differences in how young people in Georgia and Latvia relate to their 'traditional' culture, and to what extent they embrace modernity.

That no tradition is written in stone is evident from the interviews conducted in Georgia as well. While the informants talked about the importance of cherishing traditions, the same teenagers also claimed that some Georgian traditions were 'unnecessary' or 'unsuitable' in the modern world. For example, young people mentioned the issue of early and/or arranged marriages, and questioned the 'traditional' expectation that women should obey their husbands. In their opinion, such traditions should be left behind or adjusted, as they inhibit the development of the country: 'There is a conflict between the modern world and Georgian culture, because of the old traditions. They should be adapted to the modern world, and we will get something new and good which will be a precondition for development and education' (Gia, male, semi-urban school, Georgia). The perceived incompatibility between Georgian traditions and the 'modern world' was repeatedly expressed during the interviews. However, this in no way diminished the informants' perception that their 'own' cultural space meant the national one. The same holds true for Latvia.

A rather special case, vividly illustrating the importance of 'regional' rather than 'national' identity, was observed in the Latvian region of Latgale.[12] Here, young people developed an additional layer of identity in addition to the national one, although the latter was also present. This is to say that multi-layered identities could be clearly observed in the Latgale interviews. The Latvian identity was in the background, and the regional Latgale one was in the forefront. In addition, young informants of ethnic minority background living in Latgale (e.g. Poles) had a third 'layer' of identity related to their ethnic belonging. Descendants of people who have been multicultural for centuries, the young Latgale respondents were well aware of their belonging in different cultures. Importantly, their perceptions of their multi-layered identities were harmonious and non-conflictual:

> I am from Latgale, and I like it. I have two grandmothers and two grandfathers in the family, and each of them has their own culture. I don't have to speak only Latgalian or Latvian, because my ancestors are Old Believers or Jews. They spoke Yiddish or Russian, and consider these languages as theirs. They have always lived here. They are not outlanders. It's best when you can consider everyone as yours without changing anything about yourself. (Yan, male, semi-urban school, Latvia)

The data suggest a clear dominance of national self-identification in the perceptions of young respondents in Georgia and Latvia. While being well aware of the wider world 'out there', they feel most comfortable in their national contexts. Moreover, they feel a responsibility to take care of their national culture and traditions, even when this task is perceived to be rather complex.

'Distant' Europe

European discourse plays an important role in Latvia and Georgia, as does the technical and humanitarian assistance that the EU provides. The data suggest, though, that perceptions of Europe, and young people's sense of belonging to it, are all but straightforward, with notable differences between the two countries.

Respondents in both countries (to a slightly lesser extent, in Georgia) believed to be, at least to a certain extent, Europeans due to the fact that their countries are, geographically, part of Europe. They also believed they hold what they believed to be 'European' values. Democracy, tolerance, liberty, economic welfare, education, and cultural diversity were some of the shared values that were named during the interviews in Georgia. In Latvia, it was very important for the informants that the country is part of the European Union.[13] Those who have visited other European countries or who have established closer contacts with their peers in other European countries, acknowledged more clearly their cultural similarity with the rest of Europe: 'Germans have a good saying: "live to work", so I believe I have similar values with them and in general, I think, all European citizens have a similar culture, rather similar values. This links us all.' (Fritz, male, semi-urban school, Latvia)

In both countries though, some respondents claimed not to have a clear idea and picture of Europe, its people, and culture: 'I do not consider myself to be European, because I do not really know what is going on there. I just know from others and from the internet, but we do not really realize yet what Europe is and how it is to be European' (Avto, male, semi-urban school, Georgia). Knut from Latvia developed the thought further, while putting a stronger emphasis on the national, rather than European belonging:

> I think yes [I'm European], but I don't know how to really define who a European is. Technically, we are in Europe and in the EU, and it is what I associate with a European, but it seems to me that every person in their own country is associated with it. Of course, they are also for Europe, the EU, and things like that, but they are more patriots of their own countries than patriots of Europe. (Knut, male, urban school, Latvia)

Thus, importantly, no general, or shared understanding of 'Europeanness' can be derived from the interviews conducted in either Latvia or Georgia. Moreover, young people's views of Europe – and of belonging in Europe – were quite different in the two countries. It was certainly more controversial in Georgia than in Latvia. Even though the general attitude is positive, some of the respondents in Georgia had sceptical views about Europe and its values. Some did not like the very idea of Georgia

being part of Europe. They claimed that their 'Georgianness' was nothing like being a European: 'I do not consider myself to be European. < ... > Even if we become part of the European Union, Georgians will still remain Georgians and Europeans will be Europeans. < ... > I think that our morals and values are very different' (Kato, female, urban school, Georgia).

Openness to Europe seems to be a significant divider between people in Georgia. Pro-European teenagers would distance themselves from other – as they put it – 'closed-minded' Georgians and claim to be Europeans. They did not want to be associated with a less developed and overly traditional Georgia, as they saw it. When talking about Europe and European culture, these young respondents referred to 'modernity' and progress, while Georgian culture is more associated with history and traditions, as shown above. In contrast with Georgia, no reservations or hesitations about European culture were encountered in the interviews conducted in Latvia.

Some respondents, primarily in Georgia, were willing to adapt European values and lifestyle, but only provided that they could, at the same time, stick to 'their' traditions and culture:

> Europeanness is not just a lifestyle for me. Europeans have a lot of positive things. < ... > The level of education, the health care, the economic situation that distinguishes them from others. All of this pushes us towards them, towards the better, but of course it does not mean that we should drive away from our culture and our heritage. We should somehow merge European culture with Georgian culture and say 'we are Georgians and therefore we are Europeans'.[14] (Vakho, male, semi-urban school, Georgia)

Overall, national belonging and national identity came first for young people in both countries. Similar to Vakho from Georgia quoted above, Anna from Latvia claimed that while being part of Europe, it was important for her and her peers to preserve their national identity. She stated, 'It is important to be in Europe, to use the Latvian language, to know the same cultural monuments, to respect and to be proud of yourself, your people, your family' (Anna, female, rural school, Latvia).

Another difference in the interviews conducted in the two countries reflects the perception of the relative level of development of Europe and the respective country. While a similar issue does not appear in the Latvian data, some Georgian respondents did report that their country, in their opinion, was not as 'developed' as European countries:

> Europeans are more developed, in terms of level of education. < ... > In Georgia, there is still a stereotypical Soviet way of thinking regarding some issues. For example, gender equality and freedom of speech. < ... > Gender equality is an issue everywhere, but they [Europeans] handle it much better. < ... > Europe is so much ahead of us in civil issues, and we are behind. (Nato, female, semi-urban school, Georgia)

The clear difference between the countries is that young people in Latvia tend to think of the country as part of Europe, while this perception does not seem to be similarly strong in Georgia. In any case, in both countries, there is a stronger sense of belonging to a national or regional culture, rather than to a European one.

Conclusions and discussion

While the existing theoretical approaches suggest a potential confusion in identity formation for post-Soviet youth, the findings of this study indicate the opposite. Even though the respondents' socialization took place during a challenging historical period, the interviews provided no evidence of a crisis of identification. On the contrary, the interviewed young people seemed rather confident in seeing themselves as primarily Georgians/Latvians, and, to a lesser extent, as Europeans. In both countries, young respondents reported a strong sense of belonging and emotional attachment to their national culture. This sense of belonging was, most often, subjectively harmonious.

In the interviews conducted in Latvia's Latgale region, there are cases of more complex, multi-layered identities. However, the interviews conducted in Latgale do not suggest conflicts or crises of young informants' self-perception. Respondents seem to be able to effectively manage their sense of belonging to the cultural spaces they interact with.

Respondents consider their traditional culture to be very important, although they may also report not always being interested in it, as in Latvia, or some traditions to be unnecessary and outdated, as was reported in Georgia. Even so, in both countries, young people repeatedly reported being proud of their national culture, traditions, and language, which they perceive to be an essential part of their identity.

European integration played and continues to play an important role for the populations of Latvia and Georgia. It is accompanied by extensive pro-EU information campaigns. The campaigns' impact on the development of young people's identities in these countries is still not fully clear. Findings show that young people – especially in Latvia – have internalized the ideas of being part of Europe and often see themselves within the frames of 'European culture'. Respondents in both countries often showed a strong sense of belonging to Europe and reported sharing European values, such as freedom, liberty, democracy, and tolerance. However, in both countries, young respondents reported a stronger sense of belonging and emotional attachment to their national culture than to the European one. With rare exceptions, they were happy to embrace the European identity, but they would not accept this as their main identity. Instead, they insisted on the primacy of their 'Georgianness' or 'Latvianness'. Some aspects of the broader European culture were indispensable for their lives, but they prioritized their own culture and traditions. Especially in Georgia, young people were willing to adapt European values and lifestyle only provided that they could, at the same time, stick to 'their' traditions and culture.

These findings are in line with other evidence, which suggests that people in Europe tend to prioritize their national and regional belonging, while attaching less importance to their understandings of self as European or global citizens (Khondker, 2005; Paasi, 2003; Runce, 2013). Seeing oneself primarily in a regional and local frame may provide a stronger sense of stability. National identity provides a sense of political security and protection, creating a 'survival unit' (Elias, 1996). It also provides psychological security, because family is within the same space and the culture of this space feels closer and more familiar. In some cases, national identity may be an often-unconscious protest against the trends of globalization and unification (Paasi, 2003, 2013).

Finally, no evidence of the importance of the Soviet past on identity formation of today's teenagers in Georgia and Latvia was recorded during the interviews. The Soviet past seems to be completely forgotten, to the extent that it no longer matters for young people's lives and their identity formation. When discussing cultural spaces important to them, the interviewed young people did not mention any cultural spheres that relate to Soviet heritage, and they surely did not have any sense of belonging to a (post-) Soviet space.

Notes

1. The project aims to study the cultural education practices and cultural identities of young people in the partner countries (Croatia, Georgia, Germany, India, Latvia, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey and the UK). More information about the project can be found on the project's website. http://chiefprojecteu.com/.
2. https://crrc.ge/en/.
3. https://du.lv/en/.
4. For comparison: the ethnic composition of the population in Latvia is as follows: Latvians 62.2%, Russians 25.2%, Belarusians 3.2%, Ukrainians 2.2%, Poles 2.1%, Lithuanians 1.2%, others 3.9%. (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde).
5. All interviewers were fluent in Latvian and Russian languages. An interviewer who worked in the Daugavpils with a high share of ethnic Polish students spoke Polish.
6. https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/AAPOR-Code-of-Ethics.aspx.
7. Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907) was a Georgian public figure, journalist, publisher, writer and poet, whose ideas are rather influential until the present time.
8. https://www.nytimes.com/1978/04/18/archives/soviet-georgians-win-on-language.html.
9. https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2020ge/VOTLELE-by-AGEGROUP/
10. Sometimes, these campaigns may have a strong anti-Russian component, as it was the case in Georgia after Russian troops' invasion in 2008, or numerous acts of 'creeping occupation' of the territory of the country (https://iwpr.net/global-voices/Georgia-creeping-occupation-continues).

11. It is important to keep in mind that the present paper is based on the interview data only, thus – exclusively on the verbal information provided by the respondents.
12. The specific characteristics of this region are discussed in the data collection section.
13. Latvia has been an EU member state since 2004.
14. The respondent is quoting Zurab Zhvania, a Georgian politician and, for a brief period, the Prime Minister of the country, who made this claim at the Council of Europe on 27 January 1999.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributors

Tamar Khoshtaria is a senior researcher at CRRC–Georgia, where she has been working since 2009. She is the team lead in Georgia of the EU funded international project 'Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future' (CHIEF). Tamar holds a PhD in Sociology from the Tbilisi State University, where she teaches quantitative and qualitative research methods. She holds her B.A. and M.A. in Social Science (Sociology) from the same university. During her M.A. she was awarded a scholarship and studied at the Humboldt-University Berlin for one year where she conducted qualitative research in family sociology. Her research interests are the values of young people, social and religious issues as well as intercultural comparisons.

Dr. Tinatin Zurabishvili coordinated some of the first empirical research projects in the Caucasus, e.g., CRRC Caucasus Barometer survey. As CRRC Georgia's research director in 2012-2018, she has supervised numerous applied social research projects in Georgia, focused on social attitudes, civil society development, youth, media, migration. She has collaborated closely with various international organizations, to name a few: OECD, European Commission, Europe Foundation, ICMPD, IOM. She has also taught courses in sociology (including research methodology) at Telavi State University, Tbilisi State University and GIPA, and co-authored respective textbooks.

Alina Romanovska is a researcher of the Centre of Cultural Research of the Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Daugavpils University, Latvia. Her research interests include identity, regional studies, contemporary Latvian culture and comparative literature. She has more than 70 publications and is the author of a monograph. She has managed and/or participated in several international and national research projects, for example, The Seventh Framework Programme, Interreg, National Research Programme 'Letonika', Cost Action, H2020.

Dustin Gilbreath is the Deputy Research Director at CRRC Georgia. He lectures on impact evaluation at Ilia Chavchavadze State University in the Department of Education as well as the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University.

References

Apine, I. (2008). Vēsturiskā pēctecība Latvijas krievu pašidentifikācijas procesā (18.–21. gadsimts) [Historical succession in the process of Latvian Russian self-identification (18th – 21st century)]. In D. Bleiere & A. Karlsone (Eds.), *Letonikas Otrais kongress. Vēsture un identitāte. Kongresa referāti* (pp. 40–53). Zinātne.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (1989). *The empire writes back* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Blum, D. W. (2007). *National identity and globalization: Youth, state, and society in post-Soviet Eurasia*. Cambridge University Press.

Charmaz, K. (1996). Grounded theory. In J. A. Smith, R. Harre, & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology* (pp. 27–49). SAGE Publications.

CRRC-Georgia (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Georgia). (2020). *caucasus barometer 2020 georgia* [data set]. https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2020ge/VOTLELE-by-AGEGROUP/

Eglīte, P., & Mežs, I. (2002). Latvijas kolonizācija un etniskā sastāva izmaiņu cēloņi 1944.–1990. gadā [Colonization of Latvia and changes in ethnic composition in 1944–1990]. In I. Šneidere (Ed.), *Latvijas vēsturnieku komisijas raksti, 7. Okupācijas režīmi Latvijā 1940.–1956. gadā. Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas 2001. gada pētījumi* (pp. 405–443). Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds.

Eglīte, P. (2011). Padomju okupācijas demogrāfiskās, sociālās un morālās sekas Latvijā [Demographic, social and moral consequences of the Soviet occupation in Latvia]. *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*, 65(3/4), 86–106. http://archive.lza.lv/LZA_VestisA/65_3-4/6_Eglite_Padomju%20okupac.pdf .

Elias, N. (1996). *The Germans*. Polity Press.

Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2006). *Young people and social change: New perspectives* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2015). *Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment*. Routledge.

Jones, R. (2000). Changing geographies of governance and group identities in the middle ages: The role of societal interaction and conflict. *Political Geography*, 19(7), 901–926. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(00)00030-5

Kaprāns, M., & Zelče, V. (2010). Identitāte, sociālā atmiņa un kultūras trauma. In M. Kaprāns & V. Zelče (Eds.), *Pēdējais karš: Atmiņa un traumas komunikācija* (pp. 11–28). LU Sociālo un politisko pētījumu institūts.

Kaša, R., & Mieriņa, I. (Eds.). (2019). *The emigrant communities of Latvia: National identity, transnational belonging, and diaspora politics*. Springer Open.

Keating, M. (1997). The invention of regions: Political restructuring and territorial government in Western Europe. environment and planning C. *Environment and Planning C*: *Government and Policy*, 15(4), 383–398. https://doi.org/10.1068/c150383

Khondker, H. H. (2005). Globalisation to glocalisation: A conceptual exploration. *Intellectual Discourse*, 13(2), 181–199. https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id/article/view/109/111 .

Khoshtaria, T. Kobaladze, M. & Zurabishvili, T. (2018). History in danger and youth civic engagement: Perceptions and practice in. In G. Telavi, H. Pilkington, G. Pollock, & R. Franc (Eds.) *understanding youth participation across europe: from survey to ethnography* (pp. 293–315). Palgrave Macmillan.

Koroļeva, I., Rungule, R., Sniķere, S., & Aleksandrovs, A. (2009). Jauniešu identitāte un līdzdalība. Latvijas Universitātes Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts,&Latvijas Universitātes Vēstures un filozofijas fakultāte, In *Latvijas jaunatnes portrets: Integrācija sabiedrībā un marginalizācijas riski* (pp. 145–188). LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.

Kursīte, J. (2005). *Nomales identitātei [Peripheral identity]* (Madris).

Latvijas Republikas Saeima. (2010). *Latvijas ilgtspējīgas attīstībasstratēģija līdz 2030 gadam [sustainable development strategy of Latvia 2030]*. https://www.varam.gov.lv/sites/varam/files/content/files/lias_2030_lv.pdf

Levi, I. (2007). Identity and conflict. Social Research: An International Quarterly, 74(1), 25–50.

Nodia, G. (2009). Components of the Georgian national idea: An outline. *Identity studies in the caucasus and the Black Sea Region* , 1. https://ojs.iliauni.edu.ge/index.php/identitystudies/article/view/8

Ozoliņa, Ž. (2016). Societal security: Conceptual framework. In Ž. Ozoliņa (Ed.), *societal security. inclusion-exclusion dilemma. a portrait of the russian-speaking community in latvia* (pp. 13–28). Zinātne Publishers.

Paasi, A. (2003). Region and place: Regional identity in question. *Progress in Human Geography*, 27(4), 475–485. https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132503ph439pr

Paasi, A. (2013). Regional planning and the mobilization of 'regional identity': From bounded spaces to relational complexity. *Regional Studies*, 47(8), 1206–1219. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2012.661410

Roberts, K., & Fagan, C. (1999). Young people and their leisure in former communist countries: Four theses examined. *Leisure Studies*, 18(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/026143699375023

Romanovska, A. (2019). The Search for Regional Identity: Latgale in Latvian Literature in the First Decades of the 20th Century. *Forum for World Literature Studies*, 11(1), 39–62. https://www.scopus.com/record/display.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85068712148&origin=inward&txGid=c5b088bdcac741f00d30281b0180f1ce .

Rozenvalds, J., & Zobena, A. (2014). Priekšvārds. In J. Rozenvalds & A. Zobena (Eds.), *Daudzveidīgās un mainīgās Latvijas identitātes* (pp. 9–22). LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.

Runce, I. (2013). Reģionālās identitātes veidošanās procesi Latvijā pēc neatkarības atjaunošanas [Processes of formation of regional identity in Latvia after the restoration of Independence]. *Akadēmiskā Dzīve*, 49, 32–39. https://www.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/lu_portal/adz/arhivs/49/49.pdf .

Said, E. W. (1985). Race, Writing, and Difference. In *Critical Inquiry 12 (Autumn)* (pp. 38–58).

Saleniece, I. (2005). Pagātnes bailes mūsdienu skatījumā [Fear of the past in the modern perspective]. *Sociālo Zinātņu Vēstnesis*, 1, 63–72.

Steger, M. B. (2014). *Globalization and ideology: A global studies perspective*. Routledge.

Szeman, I. (2013). Culture and globalization, or humanities in ruins. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3(2), 91–115. https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0031

Tsuladze, L. (2012). How things are remade Georgian: Glocalisation and the assertion of 'national' among Georgian youth. In G. Tsolidis (Ed.), *Identities in transition* (pp. 93–103). Inter-Disciplinary Press.

Tsuladze, L. (2011). Youth identities through bricolage in a changeable society: The case of georgia. In K. Gallagher (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: critical and inter-disciplinary perspectives* (pp. 67–76). Inter-Disciplinary Press.

Uçarol, B. A., Buğra Kurban, S., Chatterjee, C., Deák, D., Dyahadroy, S., Esmer, E., Ferrer-Fons, M., Hrstić, I., Marinović-Golubić, M., Marmer, E., Mestvirishvili, N., Mete, H., Oral, A., Popov, A., Romanovska, A., Seukwa, L. H., Soytemel, E., Stamou, E., & Sylla, C. Marmer, Elina & Zurabishvili, Tinatin eds. (2019). *National/ federal Curricula Review*. Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future. http://chiefprojecteu.com/wp-content/uploads/Chief-WP2_D2.1_National-Curriculum-Review-Reports_v1.0_14.01.19.pdf

Vides aizsardzības un reģionālās attīstības ministrija. (2010). *Latvijas ilgtspējīgas attīstības stratēģija līdz 2030*. gadam [Latvia's sustainable development strategy until 2030]. http://www.pkc.gov.lv/sites/default/files/Saturs/Latvija_2030.pdf

Walker, C., & Stephenson, S. (2010). Youth and social change in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *13*(5), 521–532. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2010.487522

Whitney, C. R. (1978, April 18). *Soviet Georgians Win on Language*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/1978/04/18/archives/soviet-georgians-win-on-language.html

Zedania, G. (2011). Societal values in georgia: Twenty years later. In N. Heyoz, D. Koleva, & L. Jesien (Eds.), *20 years after the collapse of communism: Expectations, achievements and disillusions of 1989* (pp. 253–272). Peter Lang AG.

Zobena, A., Grīviņš, M., & Ņikišins, J. (2014). Vieta, identitāte un rīcībspēja. In A. Zobena (Ed.), *Ad locum: Vieta, identitāte un rīcībspēja* (pp. 6–18). LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.

Zurabishvili, Tinatin. (2019). *Georgian Public's Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia. 2019 Survey Report*. Tbilisi: Europe Foundation. https://epfound.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/EU-2019-Final-ENG.pdf

Zvidriņš, P. (2021). *Iedzīvotāju etniskais sastāvs Latvijā [Ethnic composition of the population in Latvia]*. Nacionālā enciklopēdija. https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/5186-iedzīvotāju-etniskais-sastāvs-Latvijā

Zvidriņš, P., & Vanovska, I. (1992). *Latvieši: Statistiski demogrāfisks portretējums [Latvians: Statistical demographic portrait]*. Zinātne.