

Ethnic Minority Organizations in Russia and Poland: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract. *Ethnic minority organizations in Russia and Poland are analyzed regarding their political opportunities. One diasporic and one non-diasporic organization were chosen for each country. The diasporic organization is defined on the basis of William Safran's criteria and Rogers Brubaker's triadic configuration. The most significant criterion was the (non-)presence of "external national homeland" outside "nationalizing state". Russia and Poland were chosen as two neighboring countries with long tradition of joint co-existence in the Russian Empire and in the "Eastern Bloc", but at the same time very different qua their current political systems. In Russia, the cases are "Komi Voityr" organization representing the interests of the Komi people (non-diasporic) and the Russian Polish Congress (diasporic). In Poland, the choice was the Silesian Autonomy Movement (non-diasporic) and the "Belarussian House" (diasporic). Upon having analyzed the status, activity scope, domestic and external political impact, localization and the role in the "triadic configuration", we see that, with all four cases selected being ethnic minorities associations, their legal status and the scope of activities differs very much. Their domestic political opportunities are rather scarce. Out of the four cases, just one organization is an active part in a classical Brubaker's triadic configuration; and its role is not the traditional one ascribed to the respective "angle". Though both Russian associations are officially registered and have a certain official status, their actions are limited to cultural, memorial and linguistic domains, primarily at the domestic level. In Poland, both associations act*

internationally as advocacy groups, and their activities are not confined to the domains of culture and language.

Literature, methodology, and methods

In analyzing ethnic minority organizations, we inevitably “stand on the shoulders of giants”, such as Rogers Brubaker, William Safran, Don Handelman, Robert Cohen, Michael Banton, Walker Connor, Charles Taylor, and many others. The works by Benedict Anderson inspired me to understand ethnic community as “imagined”, in the sense that we have to imagine it, being unable to know every member of our group personally (Anderson, 1983). I would also agree with Walker Connor that ethnic group may be regarded as some sort of an “extended kinship” (Connor, 1994, p. 202). I would partly support Michael Banton’s thesis that ethnically acting individuals usually act within a paradigm of a “rational choice theory” (Banton, 2004); partly because, as a rule, rationality in the ethnic consciousness peacefully coexists with a large degree of the Irrational.

In defining the case studies for this paper, I had to choose the research design that would fit the complex nature of the ethnic structure in Eastern Europe. Neither “MDSO” or “MSDO” applied “properly” would do the task because of additional endogenous and exogenous factors. So, I decided to take two minority organizations for each of the two countries: one diasporic and one non-diasporic. Diasporic community was defined following William Safran’s criteria: the spread of the group from the initial territory of origin into external regions, collective memory about the country of origin, alienation feeling from the accepting population, the myth of a possible return to the country of origin (Safran, 1991, pp. 83-84). An additional criterion may be drawn from the work by Nina Glick Schiller: she supposed diasporic communities foster “long-distance nationalism”, that define their close affinity to an external state or region, regardless of how far it is situated from their

current place of residence (Glick Schiller, 2005, p. 570). Last but not least, I added a criterion made possible by the geographical closeness of the countries I was going to scrutinize. According to Rogers Brubaker, in case a state is trying to become “national”, and it has a certain minority group within, it is important, whether this group has “external national homeland” that may (or may not) advocate the rights of this minority (Brubaker, 1995). Such triadic configuration is usually expected to appear in case an ethnic minority group enjoys certain support from the neighboring state that is simultaneously its “external national homeland”.

Another important dimension of studying ethnic minority communities is whether what we study is actually an “ethnic minority community”, or, in our case, a more or less established “ethnic minority organization”. Here I stand on Don Handelman’s four-fold typology of ethnic incorporation. He distinguished famously between “ethnic category”, “ethnic network”, “ethnic association”, and “ethnic community”: to form the last one, the degree of incorporation means having standardized ethnic characteristics, cooperation along ethnic borders, corporative organization with the common goals, and territorial basis (Handelman, 1977). While applying his criteria to the cases chosen, we see that the diasporic organizations do not match the last “ticking box”, the territorial bases; however, all the organizations chosen for the research, match the criteria sufficiently to be called “ethnic associations”.

To some up, here I aim to study diasporic and non-diasporic ethnic associations partly inscribed into the Brubaker’s “triadic configuration”. For this purpose, and bearing in mind the above-indicated criteria, I opted for comparing “Komi Voityr” organization representing the interests of the Komi people (non-diasporic) and the Russian Polish Congress (diasporic) in Russia with the Silesian Autonomy Movement (non-diasporic) and the “Belarussian House” (diasporic) in Poland. Russia and Poland were chosen as two neighboring countries with a long tradition of joint co-existence in the Russian Empire and in the “Eastern Bloc”, but at the same time very different qua their current political systems. In the times of the

Russian Empire, parts of Eastern Poland were included into the “Russian” territory; in the post-War era, the USSR directly influenced the political system of the Polish People’s Republic (*PRL*), which borrowed many features, such as planned economy, ideological domination and repressive apparatus, from the eastern neighbor. Now, Poland is a member of the EU and NATO, and it is usually perceived (or constructed) as one of the main antagonists to the new-born Russian “imperialism” in the Eastern Europe. Its political system is considered far more democratic than the Russian one; however, under the rule of “Law and Justice” party in the recent years, the two states show many resemblances regarding the executive authoritarianism, limitations imposed on parliaments and the judiciary, and the discursive safeguarding of the so-called “traditional values”.

All the criteria combined, we come to the four cases to be analyzed in the paper. I summarized their initial features in a respective table (Table 1).

Table 1. The cases selected for the study

| Cases / criteria | Collective memory (Safran) | Alienation (Safran) | Myth of the Return (Safran) | Long-distance nationalism (Glick Schiller) | External national homeland present (Brubaker) | Ethnic association (Handelman) |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| Komi Voityr | + | + | - | - | - | + |
| Russian Polish Congress | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| Silesian Autonomous Movement | + | + | - | - | - | + |
| Belaruski Dom | + | + | + | + | + | + |

As to the methods applied for the research, it is a more or less classic case study with comparative elements. The comparison is based on the analysis of the external and internal context in which the respective associations operate, namely the institutional framework, legal status, localization, representation and activities. These lines of comparison allow me to create a profile of political opportunities for each case, that is actually the aim of this ethnopolitical study.

Case studies

“Komi Voityr” (*Komi People* in Komi), was formed in 2002 as a reaction to the legislative collision: the republican law “On the assemblies of the Komi people” was officially revoked as inconsistent with the federal legislation, because “the assembly cannot have the monopoly to represent the Komi people” (Shabaev, 2015, p. 259). Now, according to its statute, it is an “interregional public movement”, and it does not aspire to political representation. “Komi Voityr” has its branches in all districts of the Komi Republic and in some other Russian regions where Komi ethnic presence is considerable (Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi okrugs, Murmansk oblast, Saint-Petersburg, Moscow) (Markov, 2012, p. 60). It also enjoys the right to legislative initiative, according to Article 75 of the regional constitution of the Komi Republic (adopted in 1994), as an executive body of the assemblies of the Komi peoples; for sure, this right is limited to the Komi region only. In fact, it has a consultative status, comparable to the status of “Yasavey” association of the Nenets people in the Nenets autonomous okrug (see: Oskolkov, 2020).

The regional authorities support “Komy Voityr”’s activities as long as they do not interfere in the realm of the actual political struggle. The main aim of “Komi Voityr” is support for and popularization of Komi culture in the republic and beyond; so, for the republican authorities, it is a body that helps to sustain its image of ethnic uniqueness and to promote internal tourism, as well as “special attitude” to it as an ethnic unit. If in the 1990s, “Komi Voityr” took part actively in the decision-making

process regarding the use and allocation of natural resources, elaboration of cultural and linguistic policies of the republic; now its activities are confined to the domains of culture and language. The consultative status does not allow the organization to act as an independent political actor promoting its candidates at the election and setting the larger agenda; nor can it transform into a political party, because the creation of parties based on ethnic or regional affinity is prohibited by the Russian laws. Article 9.3 of the Russian Federal Law on Political Parties states that “political parties cannot be formed on the basis of professional, racial, ethnic or religious affinity” (adopted in 2001). However, it has an important opportunity to act internationally as one of the representatives of the Russian Finno-Ugric ethnic communities, even though the position of “Komi Voityr” at international Finno-Ugric congresses is usually in line with the views of the Russian authorities.

The Russian Polish Congress was launched in 1992 as a part of the global “Polonia”. It unites 48 Polish organizations in different Russian cities. The “window of opportunities” for the Russian Polish Congress is scarcer than for “Komi Voityr”. It enjoys the status of “federal national and cultural autonomy”, according to the Russian Federal Law “On National and Cultural Autonomy” of 1996, and any possibility of political action is excluded. Moreover, it can hardly act as an advocacy movement because of the Russian political practice. Though the Congress’s leader, Halina Romanowa, is a member of a consultative body by the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, this position is merely of symbolic significance. In fact, the Congress is excluded from the “triadic configuration” because of this non-ability to act politically. Since Polish ethnic minority in Russia is dispersed, the Congress’s activities are not concentrated in a particular location. Though both “Komi Voityr” and Russian Polish Congress are officially registered and have a certain official status, their actions are limited to cultural, memorial and linguistic domains, primarily at the domestic level.

Silesian ethnic movement is based on the constructivist perception of the Silesian people that present themselves as the ancestors of the indigenous Slavic population of Silesia, i.e., a historical region situated mainly in Poland (Wrocław, Katowice), but also partly in Germany and Czechia. In 2011 Polish census, ca. 817 thousand individuals identified themselves as Silesians. As Józef Koźdoń, one of the founders of the Silesian nationalist movement, wrote, “I am not a German, but neither am I or want to be a Pole (...). Language community is not a national community. The decisive factor is a spiritual community” (Jerczyński, 2006, p. 31). The Silesian Autonomy Movement (Ruch Autonomii Śląska) was formed in 1990 as an advocacy group to (re)establish the autonomy the Polish part of Silesia had before the war (see: Zweiffel, 2013). It is not officially a political party, but a social movement; however, it participates in the elections as a registered advocacy group.

The main ideology of the Silesian Autonomy Movement is ethnoregionalism, i.e., the claims for more autonomy for the particular regions, based on the ethnic distinctiveness of these regions' population. To classify it as a nationalist movement, as Norbert Slenzok puts it, would be incorrect, because the Ruch sees the Silesian people as “inclusive, pluralist, and variative community” (Slenzok, 2019, p. 266). One of the movement's main activities is the organization of “Autonomy Marches”; the first one took place in 2007. As an organization with a status quite similar to the one of a political party, the Silesian Autonomy Movement may exert direct influence on the Polish political system. However, since its program is directed exclusively to the Silesian ethnic activists, it has no representation at the national level. Its activities are confined to the Silesian Voivodeship. However, even there, in the Silesian Regional Assembly, the movement was present in 2010-2018 only, with 3-4 seats. In the incumbent assembly, no seats are allocated to the Ruch. The movement is one of the founding bodies of the Silesian Regional Party (*ŚPR*, established in 2017), which has no representation at any level of governance. Its program covers various aspects of the self-government; hence, it stretches far beyond cultural and linguistic issues. The Movement acts internationally in the framework of the European Free

Alliance, an umbrella organization for independence- or autonomy-seeking parties in Europe; the Alliance is also present in the European Parliament, as a part of the Greens-EFA political group. The Ruch also has a number of sister organizations in Europe, such as the “Initiative for the Silesian Autonomy” (Germany) and “Silesian Autonomy Movement” (United Kingdom).

The “Belarusian House” (Belaruski Dom) is officially a foundation (non-governmental organization), without specific mention in the Polish legal system. It was officially opened in Warsaw in 2012. It maintains close cooperation with other Belarusian diasporic communities. As an NGO, the Belaruski Dom does not have a direct opportunity to influence Polish internal politics, but it acts broadly as an advocacy group and presents itself as an “alternative embassy” opposed to the current Minsk representatives, with its primary aim “to serve Belarus, not the diaspora” (Chapman, 2013). It is an active part of the “triadic configuration”: after the 2020 post-election protests in Belarus, the Belaruski Dom organized numerous campaigns to support the political prisoners and other opposition activists, in terms of financing, medical care and consultations. It also organized the meeting of opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, with the diaspora in Warsaw. Before and after the 2020 political crisis, the foundation held numerous cultural and educational activities, such as educational visits to Poland for the Belarusian citizens, meetings with Belarusian diasporic writers and journalists, as well as solidarity actions with the people of Belarus. The Belaruski Dom also acts internationally, especially in the framework of different EU programs, such as Erasmus+. Though both Silesian Autonomy Movement and Belarusian House have a certain official status, their domestic influence is scarce; however, both act internationally as advocacy groups, and their activities cannot be limited to the domains of culture and language.

Comparison

To compare the cases, I prepared a table that includes main criteria and the description of the parameters (Table 2).

Table 2. Political opportunity profiles of the associations selected

| <i>Ethnic Association</i> | <i>Legal Status</i> | <i>Scope of activities</i> | <i>Domestic political impact</i> | <i>External political impact</i> | <i>Role in the "triadic configuration"</i> | <i>Localization</i> |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| <i>Komi Voityr</i> | Interregional public movement | Cultural and linguistic | The right to legislative initiative stipulated in the regional constitution of Komi Republic, but now is confined to cultural affairs | Representative of the Komi people in international Finno-Ugric congresses, but the agenda is similar to the official Russian position | None, since there is no "external national homeland" | Primarily the Komi Republic; several local branches in the regions with sufficient Komi ethnic presence, but there are no possibilities for any kind of even semi-political action |
| <i>Russian Polish Congress</i> | Federal national and cultural autonomy | Cultural and linguistic, partly also educational | Consultative status by the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, that refrains from any actions in | None | Insignificant; though all the "angles" are present, since the organization does not interfere in the | Dispersed through ca. 50 Russian cities with significant Polish minority; not |

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|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| | | | the domain of public policy | | political process, it can hardly be considered an active participant in “triadic” interactions | concentrated in a particular region |
| <i>Silesian Autonomy Movement</i> | Social movement, acting locally as a political party or in close association with the Silesian Regional Party | Regionalist, electoral; the program covers most public domains related to the Silesian region | Advocacy group for the Silesian autonomy; in 2010-2018 enjoyed small representation at the regional level; as in 2021, no representation at any level of governance | Active member of the European Free Alliance; maintains close relationships with other ethnoregionalist political movements and parties across Europe, including Silesian groupings outside the Polish Silesia | None, since there is no “external national homeland” | Silesian Voivodship |
| <i>Belaruski Dom</i> | NGO, foundation | Human rights advocacy, | Formally none; informally, the center of the Belarusian | Self-proclaimed “alternative embassy of | Highly important; acts primarily as an external actor | Headquarters in Warsaw; however, |

| | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| | (<i>fundacja</i>) | education, political lobbying | diaspora and opposition to Lukashenka's regime in Poland | Belarus" in Poland, maintains close relationship with the EU and different international programs, including educational and human rights projects | representing the alternatives to the incumbent regime in Belarus; facilitates international contacts of the Belarusian opposition. However, the role in the "triangle" is not the classic one (defense of ethnic minority's rights) | also active in other Polish cities with active Belarusian communities |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|---|---|

Conclusion

To sum up, we see that, with all four cases selected being ethnic minorities associations, their legal status and the scope of activities differs very much. Except for the Russian Polish Congress, the associations play active role in the external policies, while at the domestic level their political opportunities are rather scarce. Out of the four cases, just one organization is an active part in a classical Brubaker's triadic configuration; however, the Belarusian House does not play a traditional role ascribed to a minority's "angle" in the triangle. Instead of protecting the interests of presumably oppressed minority (Belarusians) in a nationalizing state (Poland) while conducting tight contacts with the external national homeland (Belarus), it still influences the bilateral Polish-Belarus relations, acting as an influence group

pushing for political reforms and counter-regime struggle in the above-mentioned homeland. If we compare separately the two associations based in Russia, though both are officially registered and have a certain official status, their actions are limited to cultural, memorial and linguistic domains, primarily at the domestic level. In Poland, both associations under scrutiny also enjoy an official status, though their domestic influence is scarce. However, both act internationally as advocacy groups, and their activities cannot be limited to the domains of culture and language.

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