



## **Declining significance of ethnic identity for Central and East European youth.**

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A research project has revealed that ethnic identity is less significant for younger generations in Central and Eastern Europe.

According to a report in *Socio-economics and Humanities Research for Policy News Alert Service*, Issue #20, the [ENRI-East](#) research project, showed that younger generations are less concerned with their ethnic identity and show more favourable attitudes towards Europe than older generations. Targeted support is required to encourage the continued integration of young ethnic minorities into their host countries, and the adoption of European values.

The ENRI-East project used as examples 12 ethnic minority cases, out of around 30 minority groups in 20 countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These groups were Russians in Latvia and Lithuania; Belarusians and Ukrainians in Poland; Slovaks in Hungary; Hungarians in Slovakia and Ukraine; Poles in Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania; Belarusians in Lithuania; and Lithuanians in Russia.

ENRI-East tested assumptions about the significance of ethnic, linguistic, regional, professional, gender and other identities, and the change in patterns among different age groups, using a large-scale survey of 6800 respondents; in-depth life-story interviews with 144 members of 12 ethnic minority groups in eight countries; interviews with governmental and non-governmental representatives of ethnic minorities; analysis of weblogs and internet sites run by ethnic minority groups; and a study of cultural identities and music in Hungary and Lithuania.

The research focused not only on attitudes but also on practices, such as language use, social networking, media consumption and reports of perceived or experienced discrimination. The research found that members of ethnic minorities are very aware of their ethnic identity, but that the relative importance of this type of identity decreases over the generations and may be supplanted by other identities, such as profession, gender or age.

The strongest feelings of attachment are for the location or settlement where the individuals live (91%); to their host country (87%); and to their ethnic minority group (85%), followed at a considerable distance by the country of their ethnic origin (60%) and attachment to Europe or Central and Eastern Europe (49% and 42% respectively). Ethno-national identity is strongest where minorities have been under political pressure, or where they feel they have lost their former status as a ruling nation.

The minorities most keen to continue to use their mother tongue are Russian minorities in the Baltic States and Hungarians in the Ukraine and Slovakia, while Lithuanians in Russia, Poles in Ukraine and Slovaks in Hungary are the most adaptive to using the language of their host country.

However, use of a native ethnic language does not necessarily equate to a feeling of closeness with the country of ethnic origin. Apart from Hungarians in Ukraine and Slovakia, data shows that minorities feel more at home in their host countries than in the countries of their ethnic origin, with younger generations becoming estranged from their kin group abroad and showing more favourable attitudes towards Europe than the 30+ generation.

Ethno-national tensions were reported by 9% (a lot of tension) and 37% (some tension) of respondents, but these were outweighed by 'classical' types of social anxiety, such as strains between rich and poor people, experienced by 80%, and between younger and older generations (68%).

Attempts at creating agreed ethno-national narratives have either failed or have not been made, but ENRI-East researchers found that significant scientific consensus can be achieved despite sometimes staggering differences in official historical and political narratives.

Recommendations for civil society organisations:

- In politically volatile contexts, the establishment and presence of ethnically mixed NGOs or political parties should be encouraged.
- Historical and political narratives by mixed teams of historians, sociologists and political scientists should be promoted and supported.

Recommendations for governments and officials at local, regional, national and supra-national levels:

- Targeted support for inter-ethnic initiatives is needed, ranging from public relations support for such initiatives, to enabling EU Member States or Eastern Partnership states to grant tax breaks or extend beneficial loan schemes for inter-ethnic start-ups.
- Integrationist efforts should be concentrated on the young generation (under 30 years of age). The integration of young people from ethnic minorities into their host countries in Central and Eastern Europe is rapidly progressing, and they tend to be more receptive to European liberal values than those of the 30+ generation.
- Investment into student mobility, at high school and university level, can improve attitudes towards the EU.
- Governments, civil societies and the media should promote 'Europeanness' instead of exclusive ethnic affiliations of young members of minorities.

Methods used in the ENRI-East framework have delivered a validated comparative database which can be used both in deeper or wider geographical applications. The data should be complemented by case studies in problem areas, such as the Balkans and the Ukraine, and a study of best practice throughout the EU should be carried out.

ENRI-East – Interplay of European, national and regional Identities: Nations between states along the new Eastern borders of the European Union (duration: 1/4/2008 – 30/9/2011). FP7 Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities, Activity 5, "The citizen in the European Union", Research area 5.2 "Diversities and commonalities in Europe". Collaborative project (small and medium scale focused research project).

See: <http://www.enri-east.net>

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