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Building identities in post-Soviet “de facto states”: cultural and political icons in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, and Abkhazia

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ABSTRACT

For states that have recently declared their independence but remained unrecognized “de facto states,” building a national identity is critical in the face of international rejection of their political status. Key elements of this new or re-animated national identity are political and cultural icons symbolizing the new political entity but with historical antecedents. Following Anthony Smith’s ethno-symbolism approach to the study of nationalism and motivated by Jean Gottmann’s research on iconographies in political geography, the article reports the results of nationally representative samples in four post-Soviet de facto states, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, and Abkhazia. Respondents were asked to name up to five political and cultural figures that they admired. The collated results show a great array of local and Russian names in the four republics. Categorizing the names by historical era and by provenance allows a clarification of the extent to which nation building can rely on local heroes. Among the four republics, Nagorno-Karabakh stands out for its ethno-symbolic local character, while Transdnestrian respondents identified few iconic figures. South Ossetia shows a mix of local and Russian names while the respondents in Abkhazia were divided by nationality in their choices.

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The hero and heroine embodied the innate goodness and ‘true essence’ of the nation, and it was his or her ‘exemplum virtutis’ that could help to restore a sense of dignity to downtrodden peoples and inspire and mobilize them to resist oppression and fight for self-rule. (Smith 2009, 69).

In this article, we report the empirical results of a study motivated by the quotation above from Anthony Smith (2009). Smith’s promotion of symbolic elements in research in nation-building included the special role of images of heroes and idols in the formation and certification of group identity, both in-group solidarity and

out-group exclusion. Who is an icon to a group and what kinds of backgrounds do these icons share? In the choice of icons, such as political leaders and cultural heroes of the past or the present, it is possible to gauge the identity of an individual and the strength of ties to the nation. Examination of these symbols through large-scale surveys has not received sufficient attention from researchers of nationalism, partly because of the obvious difficulty and cost of collecting representative national responses. While there is a good deal of research on national memorials and museums that includes their emphases as well as their omissions, few have examined the iconographies of the mind. The collective pantheon of heroes that individuals who declare their belonging to a nation have chosen as a result of their education, political socialization, community influences, and ideological preferences allows researchers of national identity-building to understand the cohesiveness of the nation, to clarify its cleavages, and to indicate the range of spatial and temporal influences that solidify that identity. The role of such memories in the making of the post-socialist societies is vividly elaborated in Verdery 1999.

The numbers and reputations of local heroes have a strong influence on the formation of a territorial or national identity. A native or someone who has spent a significant part of life in a particular region or polity and who promoted its independence and subsequent construction is usually identified as a "founding father." Most nations have multiples of such individuals stretching back through the generations and certifying the long ties of the group to the land that they claim exclusively. A region often becomes personified through the specific assertion of a long history of settlement by the group – along the lines of an argument that "we were here first" (Murphy 2002), making a claim to a slice of the earth's surface by a self-imagined nation. Territorial claims are strengthened by evidence, real or imagined, of historical antecedence through archeological or archival sources.

In this article, we examine the special role of memories of human heroes and idols in the formation of national identity in the context of new (or renewed) identity formations in four "de facto" states that emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union and subsequent wars in the 1990s. Though all four of our study sites (Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, and Abkhazia) had some recognized territorial definitions through the Soviet project of autonomy, their successful separation from the newly independent Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Georgia (respectively) after the collapse of the Soviet Union required a reinvigorated focus on defining the group, and its elements and exclusions, as it started the process of state-making and nation-building. We report on a set of open-ended questions that go straight to the theme of icon-making. Allowing up to five names, we asked "Who is an idol?" We repeat this question for both the political and cultural realms since we believe nation-building encompasses multiple realms of identity. Grouping named individuals by their provenance and historical era of prominence, we can assess the relationship between a respondent's perception of his/her own kind and the associations that are suggested by a particular name. By then correlating these groupings with the demographic characteristics of respondents, we

can gain insights into the reasons why these icons are central to the group identity and to the success of the physical and psychic-boundary-making processes.

In this paper, we are building on the earlier work edited by Kolstø (2005) on the symbolic elements (“Myths and Boundaries”) of nation-building in the Balkans. In turn, that work continued the emphasis of Barth ([1969] 1998) on how differences between ethnic groups are often “mythical” as well as “factual.” Barth ([1969] 1998, 6) claimed that the “cultural features of greatest import (in separating groups) are boundary-connected.” While cultural and political icons are not myths (after all, they are persons alive or dead who shaped the nation and its identity), by lauding “their people,” members of the nation are making the same kinds of boundary definitions. In his well-cited article summarizing the status, properties, and futures of *de facto* states (now the preferred term, though he called them “quasi-states” at the time he wrote), Kolstø (2006) stressed the importance of building the new or re-invigorated nation by mobilizing the internal support of the local population through propaganda from the new regimes. Among these methods beyond new flags, anthems, constitutions, state holidays, and other symbols is the cultivation of the memory of the recent war and its victims, promotion of the image of the external enemy and continued danger of attack. In some cases, like South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, the appeal is abridged for a homogenized population through ethnic cleansing so that those who might have been sympathetic to the enemy are now gone (Kolstø 2006, 730). All four territories had defined boundaries in the ethno-territorial and physiographical cartography of the Soviet Union so the new republics can hark back to earlier expressions of delimited control or claims.

This article specifically examines the relationship between the recognition of the authority of certain political and cultural figures and the development of various forms of group identity among the populations of the four post-Soviet unrecognized states; Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, and Abkhazia. The data that support our conclusions were embedded in an extensive questionnaire – over 120 separate items – and among these were two open-ended questions that allowed the possibility of choice for the respondent of up to five historical or contemporary figures for each of the political and cultural categories. A consequence of asking only about cultural and political icons was a restriction on the resulting examination of identity – in particular, we exclude the roles played by famous athletes and scientists. Authors in both the Barth ([1969] 1998) and Kolstø (2005) books underlined the role of cultural and political figures from history to the exclusion of other categories. We did not predefine what is “political” or what is “cultural.” (For the wider project and the sampling design, see O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal [2014]). This limiting assumption is quite acceptable, as previous qualitative research has emphasized the role of historical, cultural, and political figures in the examination of material objects (such as stamps or coins), flags, landscape elements, and texts (for example, Matjunin 2000; Penrose 2011; Penrose and Cumming 2011; Pointon 1998; Raento 2006; Raento et al. 2004).

Icons and national identities: the contribution of Jean Gottmann

In the burgeoning literature on nations and nationalism that shows no sign of abating, greater attention has been given in the last couple of decades to the ethno-symbolic elements of identity formation. Reacting to what was seen as an overemphasis on the role of states and elites in constructing nations and to the domination of the economic (modernist) dimensions of nation formation, scholars such as Anthony Smith drew attention to the social–psychological elements that they believe have received insufficient research consideration. Smith emphasized that he was not developing a new paradigm or a new theory of nationalism; instead “ethno-symbolism proposes ... a radical but nuanced critique of the dominant modernist orthodoxy” (Smith 2009, 13). Smith considered nations as real sociological communities, always filled with dynamism and purpose. In arguing for greater scholarly attention to the pool of “symbolic resources” available to a nation or a reservoir of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983) that could be mobilized for identity promotion, Smith advocated an examination of the iconographies which the geographer, Jean Gottmann (born in Kharkiv, then in the Russian Empire), first elaborated over 60 years ago. Though Gottmann’s ideas are now poorly circulated in the sociological study of nationalism or indeed in modern political geography (Johnston 1996), his propositions about the role of iconographies in separating and defining a national territory (Muscarà 2005a, 2005b) are long overdue a close inspection. Few works in geography have tried to consider either personal or landscape iconographies in national imaginaries, though exceptions include Ma and Fung (2007) and Terlouw (2014).

In his memorial essay, Champion (1995) recalled Jean Gottmann’s life project of conceptualizing what and how a political geography of the world would look like. Drawing on the French regional geography tradition (in particular, Paul Vidal de la Blache and his concept of “genre de vie” (type of life), and Albert Demangeon (Muscarà 1998)) in which he was trained and with which he remained imbued, Gottmann saw political units as more than administrative structures or more than their physical and human landscape characteristics.

To be distinct from its surroundings, a region needs much more than a mountain or a valley, a given language or certain skills; it needs essentially a strong belief based on some religious creed, some social viewpoint, or some pattern of political memories, and often a combination of all three. Thus regionalism has some iconography as its foundation. (Gottmann 1951, 163)

The core of his views is the concept of the geographical space’s partitioning (cloisonnement). In elaborating on the views of Vidal de la Blache, Gottmann believed that the key factor of its organization and change is circulation of people, ideas, goods, capital, technologies, etc. which collides with resistance, mostly of ideational rather than material nature, that he called iconographies. “Iconography works towards preservation of the established order and the strengthening of standing divisions.” (Gottmann 1994, 14). In *La Politique des Etats et leur Geographie*

(1952), he further elaborated his theories of “iconography,” which he saw as a force for stability “representing the need which people have to group together around shared sets of beliefs, values and identities” (Champion 1995, 199). Perhaps the most forceful expression of Gottmann’s notion of distinctiveness that is wrapped by a group’s iconographies are these sentences:

To be different from others and proud of one’s own special features is an essential trait of every human group. No group greatly resents its example being followed, but none likes to follow another’s lead. This basic character, inherent to human psychology and sociology, makes every unit of space inhabited by man essentially a human unit. The most stubborn facts are those of the spirit, not those of the physical world. (Gottmann 1951, 164)

Reflecting on these words almost 30 years later, he wrote,

The stronger cosmopolitan or ecumenical trends are, the more regionalism develops to balance them. Some thirty years ago, with a youthful enthusiasm for daring generalization, I wrote that the most stubborn facts were those of the spirit, and that the most lasting partitions were those in the minds of men. These statements have long been resented by many geographers. At first, they seem even to have been interpreted by many social scientists (including some distinguished political scientists) as confirming the dominance of the spiritual over the temporal, and therefore denigrating the role of concrete geographical space. Such views were mistakenly based on the traditional opposition of physical and spiritual as two independent and even conflicting realms. (Gottmann 1980, 439)

In fact, Gottmann’s views are closely aligned with those of Anthony Smith in his last works (2008, 2010) that reconsidered the modern nationalism projects that show no signs of ebbing even in a globalized world.

Gottmann did not elaborate much on his concept of iconographies, nor did he provide empirical validations or detailed case studies of how iconography works in practice. According to Bruneau (2000), he actually abandoned the concept in his later (1970s) publications. It has been left to others, in both the fields of cultural geography and in the sociological study of nationalism, to take up Gottmann’s mantle and develop the “school of micro-nationalist studies ... that focuses on popular, everyday expressions of nationalist practices and institutions” (Smith 2009, 19). Smith argued for more attention to the “myth-symbols complex” for more than a quarter-century as an antidote to the heavy attention to the role of ethnic entrepreneurs, economic disparities, and state actions in the study of nationalism from the constructionist perspective. In his clearest amplification of the reasons for studying ethno-symbolism, Smith (2009) wrote “By revealing the workings of national ideas and sentiment among non-elites and the underlying, if intermittently expressed, importance to them of national ideas, the study of ‘everyday nationhood’ has undoubtedly enlarged our understanding of the field” (78–79). But he also recognized the significant gaps in the existing research

Yet, it also suffers from a number of limitations. For one thing, it often fails to differentiate the various strata, regions and ethnicities of ‘the people’, each of whom or which may have different ideas and contain a variety of sentiments and preferences. For another, its

analyses tend to be confined to the populations of national (and mostly Western) states. (Smith 2009, 74)

Consideration of these factors has not received sufficient attention from researchers of nationalism, partly because of the obvious difficulty and costs of collecting representative responses from different groups, especially in non-Western contexts. While there is a good deal of research on national memorials, both in the landscape and in museums (see for example, Johnson 2003), especially about their emphases and their omissions, few have examined the “iconographies of the mind,” the pantheon of achievers that people have placed in their social–psychological profile as an result of the level of education, political socialization, ethnic attachments, community influences, travel ranges, and ideological preferences.

Historical heroes have a strong influence on the formation of local territorial identity, typically persons that took part in its construction. In the context of local identity, we can use the term *genius loci* (“protector of the place”), which, however, can embody a relatively extensive territory memorializing its creator whose biography and whose works have become associated with a particular place (home, homestead, settlement, village, city, the landscape, the terrain). The images of local heroes, unlike other iconic figures, become important for the development of other forms of identity, often deliberately cultivating specific brands. The desire to find a *genius loci* associated with every settlement, every street, and even every building sometimes reaches the point of absurdity. Typically, political, military, cultural, and sports figures (Allen 2013) dominate these street names and of course, they are often changed, sometimes in multiple successive political eras, to reflect the dominant political spirit and national orientation of the day (Light 2004; Young and Light 2001). But often birthplace and icon appear mismatched. The Ukrainian region of Poltava where Nikolai Gogol was born is closely related with his name. In the early 1990s, the “patriotic” zeal gave rise to the intention of some Ukrainian functionaries to close his museums “because he was Russian writer”. Former Ukrainian President Kuchma stated that such personalities like Gogol belonged to both Ukraine and Russia, to all humanity (Kuchma 2003).

What is a nation? Though rivers of ink have been expended in the clarification of this concept, claims to nationhood are both historical and ongoing because denigration of the claim and its attendant territorial benefits are central to opposition. Anthony Smith offers a definition that embodies the cultural and psychological values intrinsic in nationhood. For him, the nation is “a named and self-defining human community whose members cultivate shared memories, symbols, myths, traditions and values, inhabit and are attached to historic territories or ‘homelands,’ create and disseminate a distinctive public culture, and observe shared customs and standardized laws” (Smith 2009, 29). To understand how nations emerge and become self-sustaining, we need to “gauge the appeal of different motifs -myths, memories, symbols, values and the like – to various strata of the population, and the reasons for this affinity” (26). This is an approach on which we build in this paper.

The extraordinary circumstances of the implosion of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s gave rise to multiple examples of nationalist mobilizations. Some had been suppressed during Soviet times but remained active (Latvia, Georgia) and were ready to re-blossom after 1991. Others had a brief but ultimately unsuccessful flowering (Chechnya between 1994 and 1999), while others enjoyed a strong local following and foreign patronage resulting in autonomy or independence (including our four study sites). Unlike Latvia, the *de facto* states could not hark back to an earlier independence that had been squashed during Soviet times, though each had a sense of identity and separation based on ethnic and cultural values and peoples that allowed them to clarify their differences with the parent states from whom they were estranged. Additionally, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh has autonomous status from their parent states, then Soviet republics, till 1991. Given their tenuous status and the absence of recognition of their independence – at least until Russia and a few other states recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 war with Georgia – the state leaders felt it critical to establish political legitimacy and gain popular support (Bakke et al. 2018). At the same time, in a Janus-like manner characteristic of most nationalisms of “looking back” as well as “looking forward” (Nairn 1975), new countries and new ideologies in an existing polity express their identity in unique ways by commemorating historical and other mythical heroes. Nations are thus “narrated,” as Homi Bhabha (1990) underscored, as “a construction of linear narratives of nation, culture, and identity.” Thus, people negotiate relationships with a particular nation by constructing narratives that define their boundaries, separating “them” from “others.” Billig (1995) drew attention to the unremarked nature of nationalism in its taken-for-granted narratives and symbols and in this sense, our paper is highlighting some of the iconography that underpins the respective storylines. This objective is reached by the state policy of memory adopted officially or *de facto* in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It can be defined as a set of social practices and norms related with the regulation of collective memory. The policy of memory also comprises the attitude to different groups of veterans, access to archives, and funding of certain studies and publications (Miller 2009). As a result, certain events and figures get a strictly defined interpretation, their importance is emphasized and/or exaggerated, while the others are ignored, omitted or became taboo.

Icons in post-Soviet De Facto states

In two open-ended questions, respondents were asked to name up to five prominent political and cultural figures. The text of the questions read (for Nagorno-Karabakh – this republic was substituted in the other three locations). “Please name the five most outstanding political figures in Nagorno-Karabakh or other countries in our time or in the past” and “Please name the five most outstanding cultural persons (writers, composers, artists) in Nagorno-Karabakh, or in other countries in our day or in the past which you most admire.” While technically, it was possible

that we would be given a list of hundreds of names, in practice, most respondents could only identify two or three names. The average number was 2.7 of the three republics where five names were possible (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia) and less than 2.0 in the location (Transdniestria) where three names could be given to the interviewer. No geographic boundaries were placed on the names offered by respondents. As a result, names from earlier eras such as Tsarist and Soviet times, as well as names from outside the Russian/Soviet world of renowned political leaders (Barack Obama, Winston Churchill, etc.) and famous artists (Picasso, Mozart, etc.) were among the list of personalities from all regions and countries and of all historical periods. The surveys were conducted in 2010 (Abkhazia at 1000 respondents; Transdniestria, 750 respondents; and South Ossetia 500 respondents) and early 2011 (Nagorno-Karabakh, 800 respondents).

Why would *de facto* states be likely to be more interested in building identities than other states with unquestioned international legitimacy? In a contemporary world where acceptance of a new state on the political map is a very rare event, claims to membership in the international community often resort to the Montevideo Treaty (1933) principles. Its first article reads that "The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other state." Only ratified by 16 countries in the Americas, the treaty does not include a sense of nationhood, but it is certainly claimed by potential members of the international set of states. *De facto* states are confronted with the widespread support that their parent states (Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan in the case of this paper) have accrued for their position in the international arena. Clem (2014) reviewed these claims in the context of the Ukrainian crisis and the post-Soviet conflicts based on competing entitlements of history and geography. Therefore, claims about legitimate membership in the community of states must be first advocated on the basis of an unquestioned loyalty of the citizens of the putative new state and their identity with it. Small nations will typically underline their long unique histories and residence in a specific territory, and they will emphasize cultural and political distinctiveness where iconic figures feature prominently. If these individuals are locally unique – that is, not shared by other nations – then the identities are further certified. We clarify the provenance of the cultural and political icons

In the presentation of the results of the icons that are named, we consider overall ratios by different eras (Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet), geographic origins (Western and non-Western), and locals. In all cases, it was possible to match the names to well-known individuals. The comparison of these groupings gives significant insights into the nature and complexity of state identity just less than 20 years after the declarations of independence and the cease-fires that allowed them to retain their separatist status. By correlating the groups of names so classified about these lines with socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, we can gauge how national identities are evolving by age group, by ethnic identity,

Major Categories of Political Figures by De Facto State

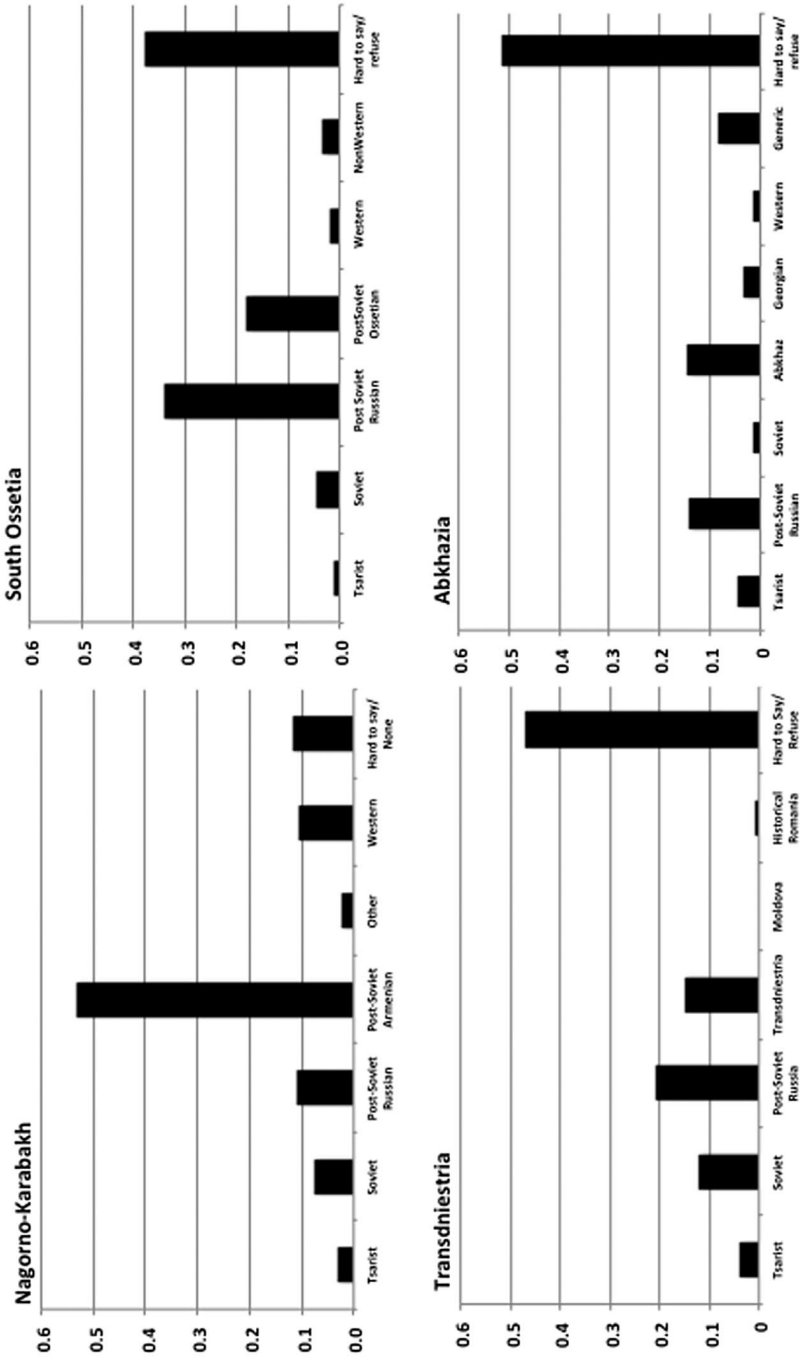


Figure 1. Comparison of Major Categories of Political Figures by De Facto State 254 × 190 mm (72 × 72 DPI).

by educational level, and by views of the state authorities. Because of space limitations, we only show the most important determining factor, which varies by republic, in the graphs and the discussion that follows.

Placing the named individuals into major categories by provenance and era (Tsarist, Soviet, post-Soviet Russian, local (Ossetian, etc.), Western and non-Western) allows us to draw some generalizations for both the political and cultural identifications. For the political categories, a major difference emerged between Nagorno-Karabakh and the other three regions (Figure 1). For all except Karabakh, the ratio of non-responses (don't know or refuse) ranged close to 50% of all possible answers – since five options were possible (three in Transdniestria), this means that the average respondent struggled to give more than a couple of names, though the range was large. For Nagorno-Karabakh, now a homogenous ethnic Armenian region, only 20% of the possible answers were empty.

The comparative graphs in Figure 1 indicate that local political figures, as well as Soviet-era and post-Soviet Russian figures (mostly Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, then President) dominated. For Nagorno-Karabakh, the Soviet-era list was dominated by the names of ethnic Armenians who were prominent in the USSR. When these numbers are combined with local political figures, the Karabakh list of icons is the most parochial of the four regions. For the other three regions, locals only constitute about 20%–25% of the names, which reflects both a short history of declared independence from the respective parent state in the early 1990s and the paucity of new national political heroes in the ensuing 20 years, a time of contorted local politics and dominance of the domestic scene by a small handful of individuals. Many of these individuals were involved in the wars of the late Soviet period and remained entrenched in the state apparatus thereafter. Pre-Soviet (from Tsarist times that lasted to 1917), Western and non-Western politicians receive only a handful of nominations, always less than 10% for each of the four republics.

The cultural categories graph (Figure 2) shows that fewer specific names are evident in comparison with the political figures identified; for all republics, a greater representation of earlier (Tsarist era) figures are named. This higher ratio of Tsarist-era persons reflects the classical education of Soviet times with strong representations of persons like writers Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy visible in all the republics. Once again, Transdniestria has a higher ratio of non-responses compared to the other states, in this case, comprising over 70% of the total. The comparative “don't know” ratios are 35% for both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and just under 20% for Nagorno-Karabakh. The reason for the dramatic difference between TMR (Transdniestria) and the other republics is suggested by answers to other questions in the questionnaire. The TMR sample was more politically alienated and concerned about economic difficulties, and it may be that such worries reflected a general dissatisfaction with the direction of the state at the time (2010) and negative prospects for the future (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creangă

Major Categories of Cultural Figures by De Facto State

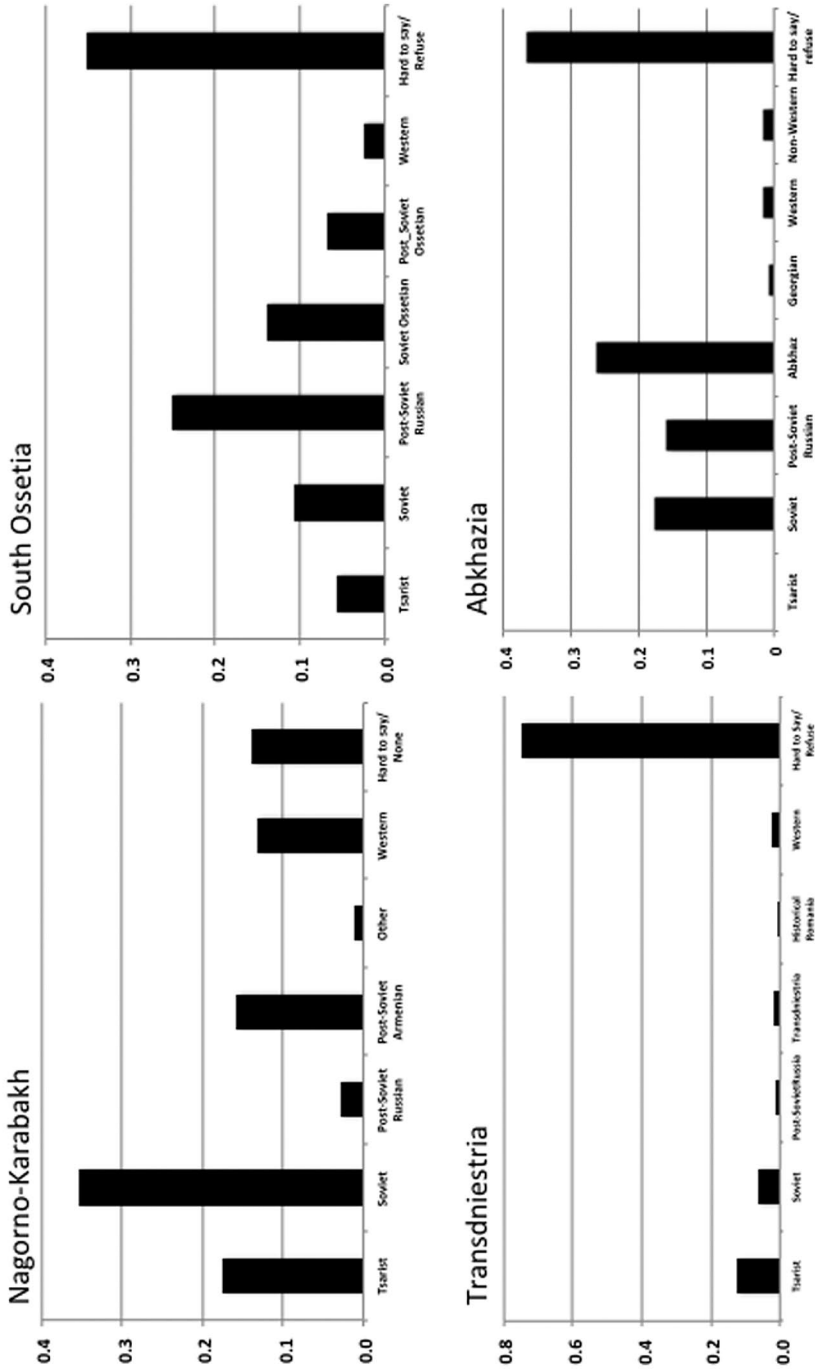


Figure 2. Comparison of Major Categories of Cultural Figures by De Facto State 254 × 190 mm (72 × 72 DPI).

2013). In this social environment, it is not surprising that the people in the sample would not be interested in cultural icons of either the past or the present.

Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia showed a higher ratio of local cultural figures than the other two states, though the names for Abkhazia were significantly different between the four different nationalities. Abkhaz cultural icons were disproportionately named by members of that nationality, while ethnic Georgians gave very few names of any era or provenance. As with the political categories, for the homogenous population of the NKR, Armenians were disproportionately represented in all categories – Tsarist era, Soviet times, post-Soviet years, and even among those identified as Western names. In all de facto states, very few Western or non-Western names were encountered, and the few that were mentioned were typically brought forward by the youngest generation, age 18–30, who are more likely to be exposed to external stimuli via access to mass media and the Internet.

The overwhelming impression of these data on political and cultural figures is that Western and other external influences were unimportant in comparison to the dominance of the Soviet legacy. Second, identities in the new republic that were engaged in both state- and nation-building were strengthened by a high level of identity of national icons in the ethnically homogenous republics of Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, and in the mixed nationalities of Abkhazia (except for ethnic Georgians) as local persons who have achieved fame in either the cultural or political realms. Transdnistria stands apart in this regard, where iconic names showed strongest attachments to Russia and to that country's political and cultural traditions. In other articles, we have reported the strong level of support for annexation to Russia in Transdnistria (about 50%) and in South Ossetia (about 80%), whereas opinions are quite evenly split on this option versus the independence option in the other two republics (Toal and O'Loughlin 2016). Third, Russian political and cultural figures are prominent in all four republics, and given the economic and security dependence of the three republics on Russia (Karabakh is significantly economically and militarily dependent on Armenia), it is no surprise that the important cultural and political persons from the external patron, Russia, feature so prominently in Transdnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

The comparative ratios for the four republics clearly indicates the greater preponderance of local political (that is, Armenian) icons in Nagorno-Karabakh compared to the other locations, while on the cultural side the ratios are lower and quite mixed. In general, respondents could identify more prominent political figures than cultural ones where the "don't know" ratios are over one-third in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdnistria. The Soviet legacy is strong, though mixed with both national-level (e.g., Josef Stalin and Anna Akhmatova) and local-level luminaries (e.g., Aram Khatchaturyan for Karabakh) evident in the names provided. The prominence of the latter category indicates that the nation-building does not necessarily rely on recent decades to assert the distinctiveness of the nation, and this is especially true when that distinctiveness was repressed

before independence. Historical claims to a singular identity prove longevity and consistency.

A comparison of political and cultural icons for individual states reveals both similarity in the presence of Tsarist and Soviet persons in the usual names offered and differences according to the uniqueness of the individual areas. Among the most common names on the cultural side were classic writers like Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy, and on the political side, Vladimir Lenin and Vladimir Putin. A noteworthy element in all states, though less so in Transdnestrria, was the identification of the icon figures who were prominent in the larger Tsarist and Soviet worlds such as General Alexander Suvurov for the TMR, Aram Khatchaturyan for Karabakh, the conductor Valery Gergiev for South Ossetia, and the writer Dmitry Guliyev from Abkhazia. A brief tour through the most commonly identified names emphasizes these common and particular themes.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Respondents from Nagorno-Karabakh, as well from other unrecognized republics, recalled many more political figures than cultural ones, particularly those politicians whose names feature in mass media on a daily basis. As the political list shows, Karabakhis were focused primarily on contemporary events in Armenia (to which they are closely tied economically, politically, and socially) and in their republic. At the top of most respondents' lists were then- (2011) and now-NKR President, Bako Sahakyan, as well as two former heads of the republic – Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, both of whom then went on to be elected presidents of Armenia. The first president of Nagorno-Karabakh, Arkady Ghukasyan, was also in the top 10, and the other most prominent politicians were contemporary Armenian leaders, including candidates at recent presidential elections.

The only important non-Armenian/Karabakhi political figures were Vladimir Putin (fourth place) and Josef Stalin (ninth place). Almost all politicians mentioned in Nagorno-Karabakh were living at the time of the survey, except for Stalin. This distribution of political names is evidence of the strongly ethnic character of Armenian and Karabakhi politics, of a deeply traumatized collective consciousness (including the 1915 genocide during the last years of the Ottoman empire and continued hostility from neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan), and of a highly politicized identity inherited from the USSR that feeds ethnic nationalism. Under the conditions of a besieged fortress, recent fighting in 2016 and a continued risk of a new war with Azerbaijan, contemporary political life is reduced to the struggle for the continued independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and the attainment of political and economic independence of Armenia, still strongly dependent on Russian support. At the same time, paradoxically, the domination of contemporary Armenian or Soviet/Armenian political and cultural figures is evidence of a certain weakness of the NKR's policy of identity building. Because of the ethnic homogeneity after the flight and cleansing of Azerbaijanis in the early 1990s, the

NKR state could not or did not need to use deeper historical strata of collective memory in political mobilization. Post-Soviet Ukraine, a mixed-ethnic state by contrast, paid much attention to compiling a list of politically relevant historical figures, with some of them declared national heroes, others as traitors and Stepan Bandera viewed as a hero and villain by different groups at different times (Liebich and Myshlovska 2014; Wylegała 2017).

A respondent's age (reflecting the period of political socialization) is an important factor determining the views of Karabakhi respondents about political leaders (Figure 3(a)). There is a statistically significant and expected difference in the popularity of Soviet political figures among young, middle-age, and senior respondents. Post-Soviet Armenian political leaders enjoy a high level of knowledge among all age groups, though they are disproportionately mentioned by the youngest respondents (18–35). Like the cultural category (Figure 3b), politicians from the West are also named more often by younger people. Importantly, the frequency

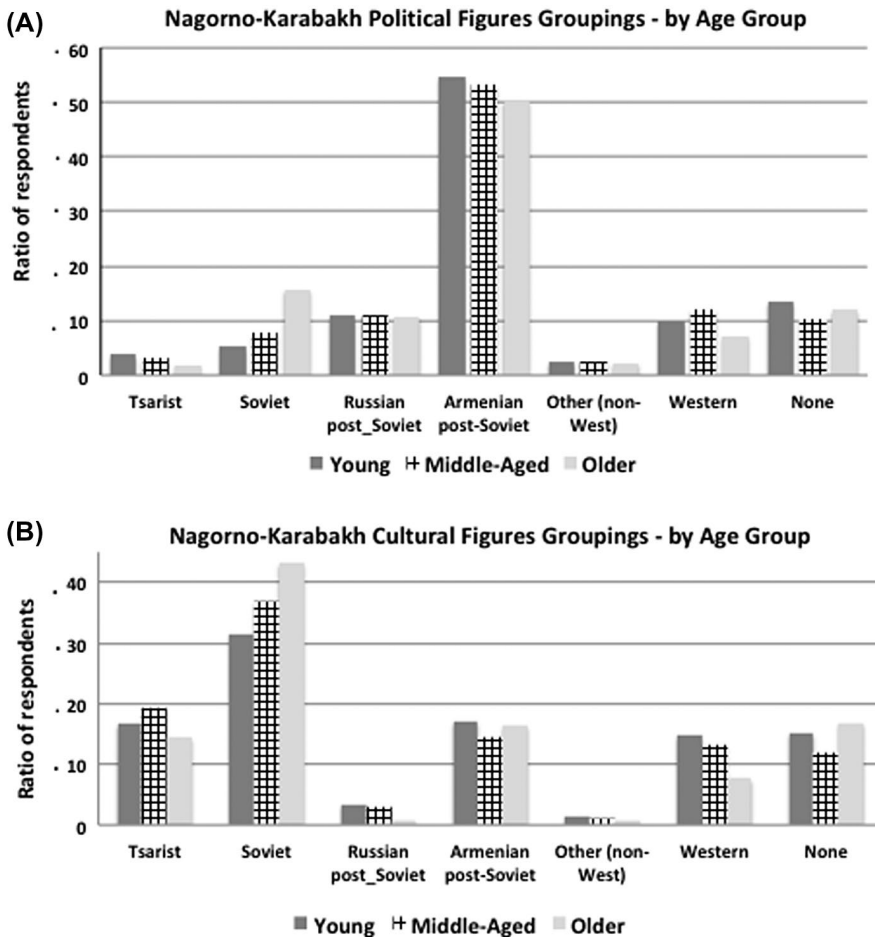


Figure 3. Comparison of Political and Cultural Figures in Nagorno-Karabakh by Age Group 254 × 190 mm (72 × 72 DPI).

of Russian post-Soviet politicians' mentions (mainly of Vladimir Putin) does not vary by age groups.

The top ranks of cultural figures in the representations of the respondents from Nagorno-Karabakh were dominated by ethnic Armenians in all categories. The only non-Armenian among 15 top cultural figures was Alexander Pushkin. Here and elsewhere, the high ranking of this Russian poet (1799–1837), whose poems were studied in every Tsarist/Soviet school, was a remnant of the Soviet past. The short cultural list is evidence of close relationships between Armenia (and Nagorno-Karabakh) and the Armenian diaspora: it included, for instance, Charles Aznavour (born Shahnour Vaghenag Aznavourian), a French singer of Armenian background who was popular in the former Soviet Union and particularly in Armenia because of his strong moral and material support of his historical motherland after the destructive earthquake in December 1988 and the most difficult years of transition 1988–1993. Similarly, the Armenian background was important for Karabakhi respondents in the case of Andre Agassi, the tennis player. Armenia is now the only post-Soviet country with an ethnically homogenous population. Obviously, in this specific ethno-social environment, the Armenian nation is interpreted in ethnic terms, as a closed and exclusive community based on ethnic (that is, biological kinship) and solidarity in the face of external threats (Shnirelman 2003).

The second feature of the Karabakhi world vision and social representations is the opposite side of the same coin. It was based in pride about Armenians who became famous not only in the small country but in the wider Soviet Union as a whole or even worldwide. Prominent was the French singer Aznavour, and this is also the case of the Soviet/Armenian composer, Aram Khachaturyan, who lived and died in Moscow. He was the leading Armenian figure for almost a quarter of the Karabakhi respondents. A third feature of Karabakhi social representations and identity was evidence of a living Soviet legacy and close relations with post-Soviet states, especially Russia. No cultural figure named lived and worked earlier than the nineteenth century, and most of them became famous in the Soviet period. This is noteworthy in the case of Armenians, who strongly proclaim their ancient roots and the Biblical past (converting to Christianity in the early fourth century). The influence of pop culture was unsurprisingly combined with a strong ethnic character. Many respondents included in the list of cultural figures such young pop singers as Razmik Amyan and Arame (born and raised in Russia).

South Ossetia

In South Ossetia, the peaceful Soviet years are remembered with nostalgia, with Soviet authorities now perceived as an efficient counterbalance to Georgian nationalism. Arguments of the Georgian Government and its public position about the negative consequences of Russian imperial policy in the south Caucasus find little appeal among South Ossetians (or indeed Abkhaz).

Accomplishments of native Ossetians at the Soviet Union or Russian scale in cultural, military, political, and other fields has always triggered feelings of national pride. Like Nagorno-Karabakh, the historical depth of prominent figures' list in South Ossetia is low; only the names of Kosta Khetagurov (poet) and of Russian classical writers suggest that the history of Ossetia did not begin only in the twentieth century (Figure 4(a)). This recent dating of figures is particularly striking in light of the typical trend of nationalizing states to revisit national history and to represent the titular ethnic group as old as possible, reinventing or introducing a new pantheon of ancient national heroes into the collective historical memory, especially those who are depicted as fighters for independence and national liberation against an "eternal enemy" (e.g. Turkic peoples, in the case of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh).

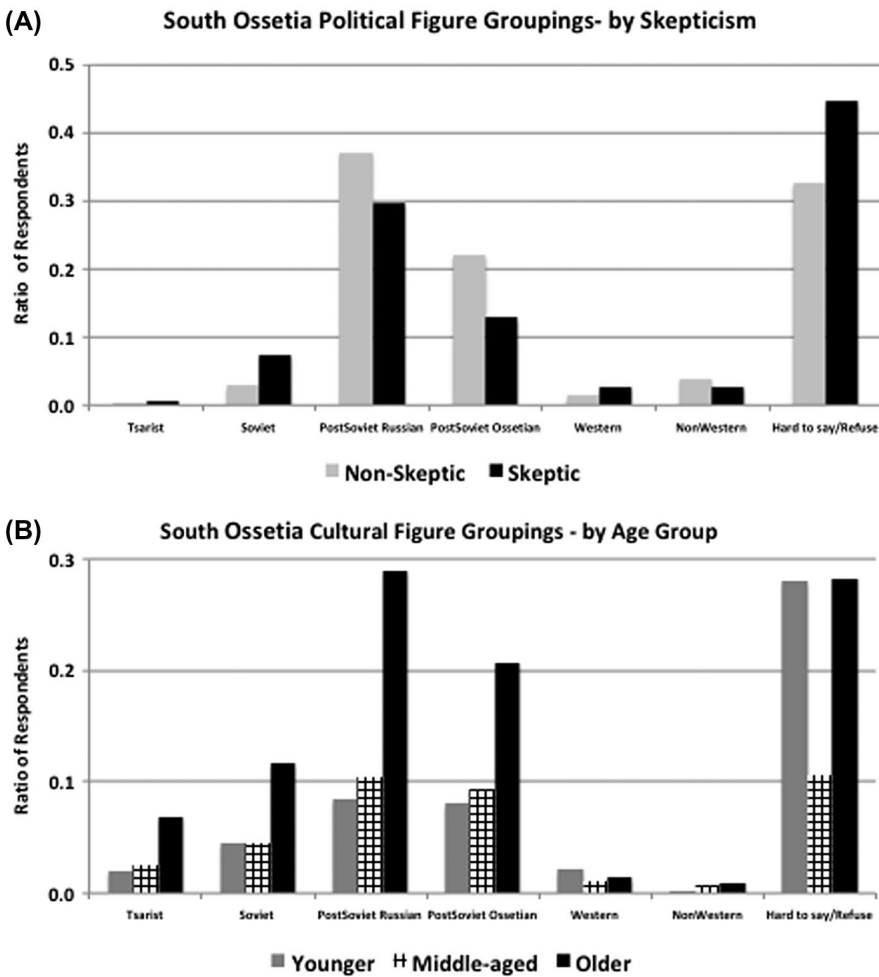


Figure 4. Comparison of Political and Cultural Figures in South Ossetia by Respondent Views of the Authorities 254 × 190 mm (72 × 72 DPI).

For South Ossetia, significant differences are evident between supporters of the Eduard Kokoity government in power at the time of the survey in 2010 and those who were skeptical of it (Figure 4(a)). The difference also correlates to differences between generations, as younger people socialized after the collapse of the Soviet Union can remember many fewer political and cultural figures. This result is certainly a result of the degradation of education during the years of the war and isolation.

A large number of respondents could not or did not want to name prominent cultural figures or named fewer than five of them (Figure 4(b)). The most popular cultural figure was Kosta Khetagurov, an Ossetian poet and activist of the nineteenth-century democratic movement, glorified and transformed into the main national Ossetian hero in the early Soviet period. His poems and biography are studied in all Ossetian schools. Khetagurov was followed by Valery Gergiev, the art director of the prestigious Mariinsky Opera and Ballet Theater in Saint Petersburg. Vasily Abaev, the third most mentioned, was a Soviet/Ossetian linguist and philologist specialized in the studies of the Ossetian language and folklore, the author of the main normative dictionary of the Ossetian. The composer Ilya Gabaraev and writer Nafi Djusoev became known in the Soviet period.

Only two figures of Russian high culture, Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy, reached the list of the top 15 personalities named by South Ossetian respondents, though listed only by few of them. Some respondents also remembered Russian Soviet and post-Soviet pop singers like Alla Pugacheva. But because of a high variety of mentions, the percentage of post-Soviet Russian figures is high. Geographical proximity and close relations with North Ossetia, a part of the Russian Federation, explain also the much higher share of Russians in the list compared to Nagorno-Karabakh.

The general conclusion is the same as in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh; representations of South Ossetians are highly politicized and ethnicized, a result of the perceived discrimination against the residents of the autonomous oblast in Soviet Georgia, of the Georgian policy of minorities' cultural assimilation, of difficult relations between Ossetians and Georgians in Tsarist times, and of course, of conflict during the period of the post-socialist transition. Social life, including culture, is considered through the prism of the conflict. Not a single Georgian name in South Ossetia (Figure 4(b)), and Azerbaijani name in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, appears on the list of prominent cultural figures. People are particularly prone to erect cultural barriers in those countries in which center-periphery and dominance–submission relations are observed.

Transdniestrian Moldovan Republic (TMR)

The hierarchy of the leading politicians in the representations of Transdniestrians was rather simple: the members of the Russian ruling “tandem” (at the time of the survey) Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, ranked respectively first and third in the number of mentions, while local leaders – Igor Smirnov (President in 2010) and

Evgeny Schevchuk (his successor) – were the second and fourth (Figure 5(a)). But the distance between Putin and Smirnov, founding father of Transdnestria, was very considerable. Other leaders making a part of top 10 politicians represented exclusively different periods of Soviet/Russian history: Stalin, Lenin, Peter the Great, Leonid Brezhnev, General Suvorov, and Mikhail Gorbachev. While this is obvious evidence of the cultural and political gravitation of Transdnestria to Russia, in our parallel simultaneous survey on the other side of the river, Putin gathered the largest number of mentions also in left-bank Moldova proper (about 30%), which was much more than any Moldovan and Romanian politician.

The Transdnestrian pantheon of cultural heroes was, firstly, a mirror of the cultivated multi-ethnic character of the TMR (Figure 5(b)). In this republic three main ethnic groups – Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians – make up almost equal parts of the population (about 30% each). Their languages are official and all of them are languages of instruction in schools, though Russian schools and the Russian

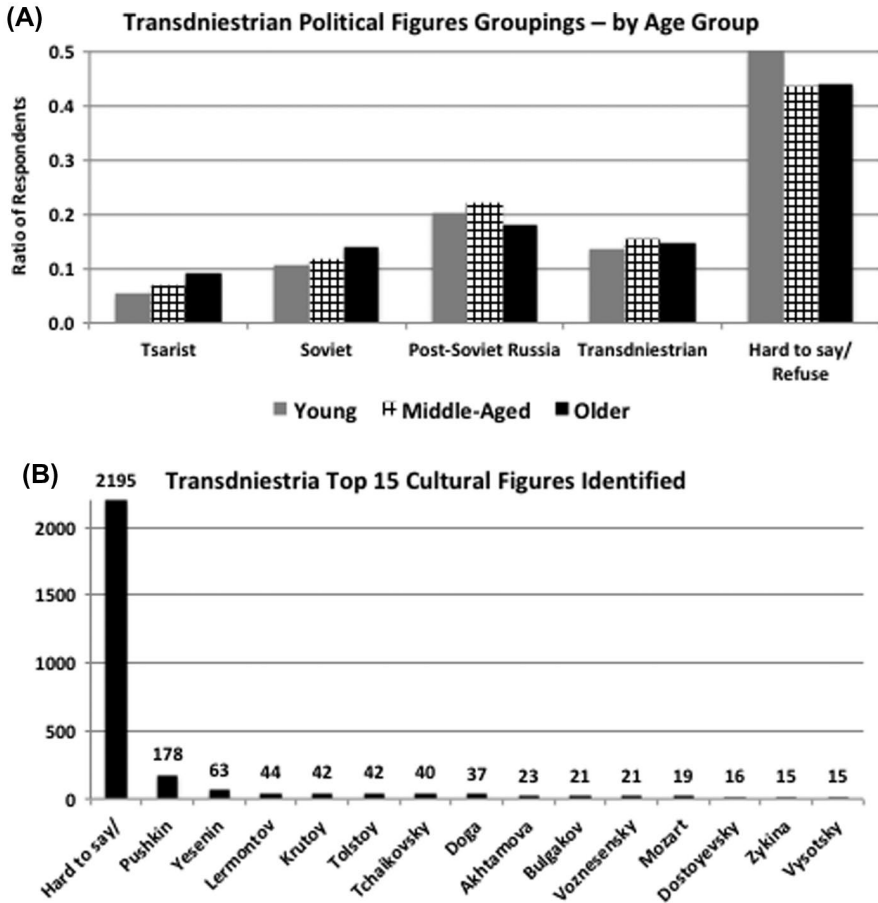


Figure 5. Comparison of Political Figures in Transdnestria by Age Group and Identification of the Top 15 Cultural Figures in Transdnestria 254 × 190 mm (72 × 72 DPI).

language dominate. The official rhetoric of the state declares that the national objective is the consolidation of the Transdnestrian political nation whose members share the same values and ideals. Our survey showed that this position is supported with practically no difference between local Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians in the set of cultural figures mentioned. As for politicians, this difference was also rather weak: it is only possible to notice a slightly higher “rating” of Transdnestrian politicians among Ukrainians and a bit lower one among Russians. Moldovans were slightly more likely to recall Soviet political leaders while naming contemporary Russian politicians less frequently.

The surveys conducted simultaneously in Transdnestria and in Moldova demonstrated that the Orthodox church and the shared Soviet past are the only common features of their respective societies. They radically differ in the use of languages, historical development, political preferences, and geopolitical orientations. It was clearly seen in the composition of their pantheons of national cultural figures and political heroes, which were very different in our survey. Among cultural icons, common figures were represented by “neutral” Russian and foreign classical writer and composers of the past (Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Bach, etc.), as well as a small number of Russian pop singers and composers. In Transdnestria, the share of Russian cultural figures made up 22% of all mentioned names. In Moldova, their ratio was much smaller at 12%, though it is still higher than the share of Romanian cultural icons.

Further statistical analysis of the TMR data on icons revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the icons identified among three main ethnic communities – by education, by urban or rural residence, by the extent of the personal experiences of the short war between Transdnestria and Moldova in summer 1992, or by the evaluation of the government’s political actions. The views of a Transdnestrian Moldovan were not different from a Transdnestrian Russian, but they have very little in common with the opinions of a Moldovan from Moldova across the river Dniester. The TMR population showed a very low level of cultural awareness compared to Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia.

For political figures, the relevant common feature of Transdnestria and Moldova were mentions of a number of Soviet and Russian political leaders, which did not depend strongly on the ethnic background of respondents. Since 1991, there has been no stable consensus in the Moldovan elite whether their country should be incorporated into Romania or remain independent. This strategic uncertainty is directly reproduced in the contradictory and unstable set of symbolic cultural figures. An obvious material illustration is the Alley of Classics (*Aleea Clasicilor*) in Chişinău, Moldova’s capital city, of monuments to prominent persons. Only 6 of the 27 were born within the contemporary boundaries of Moldova; about half are Romanian. Some Moldovan culture icons, like the contemporary writer Grigore Vieru, reject the very existence of the Moldovan language and the Moldovan nation. However, the results of our Moldovan survey confirmed the conclusions

made from numerous other national surveys: reunification with Romania has not become a Moldovan national ideal.

A strikingly high number of respondents (47%) could not or refused to name any prominent cultural figure in Transdnistria (Figure 5(b)). The hierarchy of local cultural symbols is not shaped yet – partly because of the ethnic heterogeneity and partly because the republic had been independent for less than 20 years. Except for Evgeny Doga, a Moldovan composer well known in the Soviet Union about 50 years ago for his soundtracks for popular movies, none of the cultural figures mentioned by Transdnistrians was related with this region. Interestingly, no Western figure is on the list

Abkhazia

Like the TMR, Abkhazia is a heterogeneous ethnic republic of Abkhaz, Georgians, Russians, and Armenians. For their political icons, Abkhazian citizens listed mostly contemporary “strong men” in both Abkhazia and Russia. In the top rank (shared with Vladimir Putin) was independence fighter and First President Vladislav Ardzinba, followed by Sergey Bagapsh (president at the time of the 2010 survey). The respondents listed many names from the Soviet past, including Josef Stalin. For political leaders, political solidarity between ethnic Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians are mirrored in the shared high number of mentions of Abkhazian politicians. In stark contrast, ethnic Georgians did not list such persons (Figure 6(a)). While Soviet political leaders were named more frequently by Russians, contemporary Russian leaders (Putin, Medvedev, Lavrov, etc.) were identified slightly more by Abkhaz than by Russians and Armenians. These high rankings were a clear appreciation by Abkhaz of the support of Russia to Abkhazia during the “5 Days War” in August 2008 with Georgia.

The set of cultural icons admired by Abkhazians reflects the mixed-ethnic structure of the republic and is stratified along ethnic divides (Figure 6(b)). A large proportion of Georgians/Mingrelians did not want to or could not give their opinions. The cultural list bears a strong marker of the Soviet legacy with a high representation of writers who were popular in that era. It is also affected by the proximity to the big patron and neighbor, Russia; both high and mass Russian culture was well represented in the list of names. The list combines ethnic Abkhaz, Soviet/Russian and, to a much lesser extent, Armenian figures with very few Georgian figures on it.

The distribution of cultural icons mentioned by Abkhazian respondents by historical periods and origin shows that respondents referred predominantly either to Abkhaz ethnic figures like the Soviet/Abkhazian writer Dmitry Guliyev or Soviet singers and composers. Moreover, most Abkhazian figures can be also considered Soviet, such as Guliyev who officially was called a classic writer of Abkhazian literature well before the end of the Soviet Union. As in other unrecognized republics, Abkhazians remember the figures from the recent past or from the contemporary period.

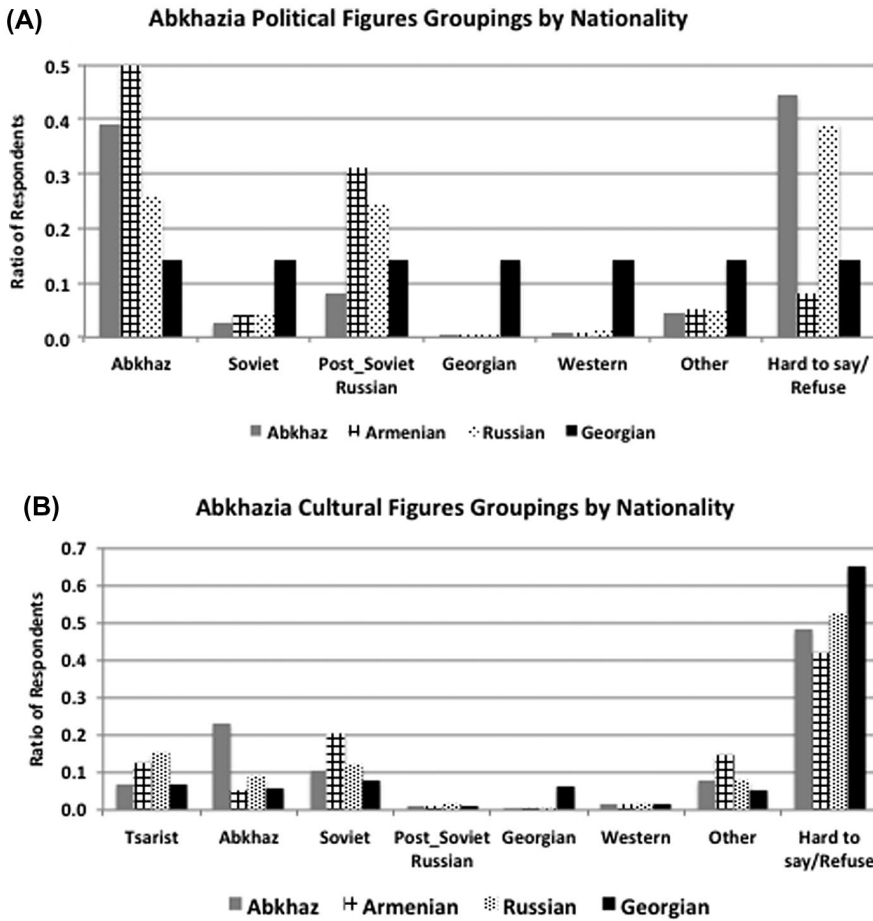


Figure 6. Comparison of Political and Cultural Figures in Abkhazia by Nationality 254 × 190 mm (72 × 72 DPI).

Abkhaz were more prone to recall ethnic Abkhazian and Soviet cultural figures, and to a lesser extent, the classic artists from the Tsarist period. Surprisingly, so did also Russians. The views of Armenians and Georgians (the small minority which answered this question) were more balanced. One can notice a higher share of Tsarist and, respectively, Armenian and Georgian figures. Western figures have a similar low rate of recall among all major ethnic groups. Therefore, there certainly exists a certain cultural basis common for all cultural groups related mainly with the Soviet past, but distinct ethnic identities and preferences are also quite visible.

Conclusions

This study was carried out less than two decades after the declaration of independence of the de facto republics, and the mixed domestic and foreign patron (that is, Russian) nature of the icons reflected the development and promotion of key

individuals in the infant years of the new states. Over time, as the state authorities crystallize their messages and the state mandates educational texts for all schools, the emphasis can be expected to shift to local traditions and iconic figures. The example of Transdnistria in publishing a national atlas and a memorial book of the 1992 conflict as well as new stamps and banknotes shortly after separation from Moldova was an early foray by that state in state- and nation-building that can be expected to be replicated in the other republics. Geography and history are important subjects that complement literature and the humanities in the making of new nations.

Leading writers on nationalism such as Anthony Smith have long emphasized the mobilizing role of the representations and (re)discoveries of the glorious past and of great national heroes as a part of the symbolic capital of nationalist ideology. Their successors in the study of nationalism analyze its dissemination through mass media and the system of education shaping ethnic and territorial identities, the perception of neighbors and of the world as a whole. The titular ethnic group and its identity are typically epitomized as existing since time immemorial and always based on the same components (language, religion, common territory, and a clear and unbroken ancestral line). The titular group is normally pictured by nationalist intellectuals as integral and consolidated, miraculously surviving despite the countless conspiracies and active efforts of enemies, near and far. A decisive role in the creation, reinforcing, and the diffusion of social representations and imaginations belongs to the state expressing the political interests of those who control it.

Culture and cultural codes are intrinsic components of ethnic/territorial identity. The formation of the unique hierarchical system of deeply venerated national heroes is an organic part of identity building. An ethnic or a political nation needs to identify itself with this pantheon; external observers also identify a nation with its prominent persons. In personifying an "imagined community," to use Anderson's (1983) phrase, they make it an important part of the symbolic capital of a nation. They have an important impact on an individual's vision of the world and serve to justify the rights of an ethnic group to a territory in which it claims exclusive privileges. The rights to a territory were especially important in the Soviet era after the 1920s, with its strictly delimited and hierarchically organized national-territorial autonomies that led to battles of identities and numerous unsettled conflicts after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The results of the surveys in the de facto states reveal that these battles had a different nature among political elites and ordinary citizens in the four republics. Irreconcilable discussions about the ancient past are the preserve of intellectuals and politicians. Mass representations on culture and politics are focused only on more or less contemporary symbolic figures representing the ethnic nation, though they still include a few Russian classical writers and composers known in all the post-Soviet spaces as well as a number of recent pop stars. As we have shown in this article, public opinion on the place of key cultural and political figures in

the local histories is a good measure of identity and inter-ethnic relations. Some de facto republics (especially Nagorno-Karabakh) are more advanced in such promotions around a clear ethnic definition of the new state that builds on a well-defined set of icons. At the other end of the scale, Transdnistria had the weakest display of knowledge and coherence around a clear set of political and cultural icons, reflecting its “in-between” history and current status as an aspirant Russian republic.

To our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to document the familiarity of residents of new states with iconic national figures that the residents identify. Gottmann’s forays into the iconography underpinning identity and territorial claims, central to political geography, were mostly forgotten in the discipline. State decisions on the relative importance and standing of icons are readily seen on banknotes, coins, stamps, street names, statues and memorials, and in school textbooks. Individuals obviously are aware of these public displays, but the extent to which they coalesce in their opinions around certain key individuals is a gage of nation-formation and public education success. The inputs to nation-formation (coins, statues, etc.) are easily identified and explained, but the scale of its reception on the output side, as measured by icon identification, is rarely measured. In this study, we hope to have partly rectified that neglect and in doing so, return attention to Jean Gottmann’s enduring legacy in political geography.

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