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What does it mean to be "Tbiliseli"? – Exploring the Identity of Tbilisi Residents

Abstract

Territorial identification can be quite important for the individual's self-definition. Whereas a vast amount of research has been devoted to the identities of broad territorial entities, e.g. national identities, little empirical research has been done on the city identity. This research, employing qualitative interviewing, looks at the content of Tbilisi identity through exploring how people born and/or living most of their life in Tbilisi make sense of themselves in relation to the city. The findings suggest that Tbilisi identity as such does exist; however, it is "personalised", thus, it could have different meanings for different individuals. Moreover, the research results suggest, that Tbilisi identity is claimed and attributed based primarily on identity markers, which can be hardly "achieved" during the residence in the city through engagement with it or commitment to it, but rather can only be "ascribed" by birth. Tbilisi identity is not seen as a process of becoming, rather than a status acquired by birth. In that sense, Tbilisi identity approximates the exclusionary nature of ethnic nationalism, and can be assumed to be based on the understanding of an identity as a rigid construct, resistant to change.

Keywords: Urban Identity, City, Tbilisi, Civic and Ethnic Nationalism, Qualitative Method.

Introduction

Place and identification are closely interlinked. Peoples' everyday life is tied to their place of residence, which can be regarded as an important influence on their self-perception. Place can be considered to be a *social* space where, and in relation to which, identification is developed. Territorial identifications can also be multiple – people can identify with their immediate locality, like the district where they live, as well as larger entities such as a city, a region or a country.

Georgia is a particularly interesting case for examining territorial identification, since locality is considered as being significant to the way people

make sense of themselves inside its borders. It can be argued that one of the important localities in the country, its capital, can potentially be a social space where a specific territorial identity can be developed. Tbilisi can be considered as an important place due to its status as a cultural, historical, political and administrative centre of the country. A capital loaded with such symbolic meanings can be thought of as a fertile ground for city identity development, which suggests that Tbilisi identity could potentially exist. While extensive scholarly work about Georgia has been devoted to the identities of broad territorial entities, e.g. Georgian national identity (Zedania 2011; Nodia 2009; Tevzadze 2009; Aprasidze 2009), identification at the level of the city can be considered as relatively underexplored. There is little empirical data, which illuminates Tbilisi identity and describes what this identity might incorporate. And yet, Tbilisi offers its inhabitants various means of identification, which can be used by its residents to imagine themselves as members of one homogeneous entity, thus it can be considered a locality where a distinct urban identity can develop. Taking into account these circumstances, this research looks at the city identity and specifically at identification connected with the urban space of Tbilisi.

Apart from the exploration of the content of Tbilisi identity, this study tries to approach the city's urban identity from the angle of ethnic and civic nationalism. In scholarly works about Georgian nationalism one of the dominant identity markers is considered to be common descent, common blood, roots, genealogy – markers associated with ethnic nationalism. It is usually argued that the importance of these identity markers varied from period to period in Georgian history. However, despite the varying level of importance based on historical context, today they can also be considered as the dominant identity markers for defining the Georgian nation.

At the same time, some scholars have suggested that the city can be a social space, which allows its inhabitants to transcend the exclusionary logics of the national, religious and ethnic backgrounds (Mueller 2011, 3417). Thus, the city can be thought of as rather an inclusionary social space, which is more commonly associated with civic nationalism.

Considering the prevalence of ethnic nationalism in Georgia, which suggests that ancestry and lineage has an important role in defining a person, it is interesting to explore empirically what actually being from a place like Tbilisi means, and question the basis for the claimed and attributed identity of "Tbiliseli," and whether the urban environment can potentially serve as a means for overcoming the exclusionary character associated with ethnic nationalism. Hence, the study explores the content of Tbilisi identity by looking at the meanings that urban identification involves and tries to question

to what extent this identification enables the formation of more inclusionary forms of identity. Importantly, the critical question about the actual existence of Tbilisi identity precedes this exploration. This research is an attempt to contribute, generally, to the in-depth exploration of city level territorial identities and, specifically, to localized urban identities in Georgia.

Defining Identity

Most fundamentally identity can be defined as "people's explicit or implicit responses to the question "Who are you?" (Schwartz et al. 2011, 2). Identity gives individuals "a singular sense of who they are and where they belong" (Weedon 2004, 19). In the process of self-identification a person tries to develop a sense of personal location, which serves as a stable core to his/her individuality (Weeks 1990, 88). Thus, identity can be defined as "multidimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities" (Jenkins 2008, 5).

But is this location stable? Does a person retain a fixed and firm self-definition after finding a particular "personal location"? Sometimes socialization of an individual is seen as a process with a terminal point. A phase of primary socialisation is considered a fundamental phase for a person's identity development. According to this notion, youth is "a state of "becoming", while "adulthood is the "arrival" (Wyn and White 1997, 11) when identity becomes fixed. However, viewing identity as having a terminal point is questionable. Though most fundamental components of identity such as selfhood, human-ness or gender are developed during primary socialisation, early in life (Jenkins 2008, 41), even these primary identifications are only "resistant to change, they're not set in concrete" (ibid., 71). Socialisation is a lifelong process; therefore, some aspects of identity are subject to constant alteration. Identity "can only be understood as a process of "being" or "becoming" (ibid., 17), thus, it is not a state but rather a process of self-identification, self-definition (ibid., 5).

Various means of identification can be used in this search for "personal location". The means of identification can be defined as "the resources on which individuals draw to formulate their sense of selfhood" (Cohen 1996, 803): objects used to construct identity. The objects utilized in the process of self-definition build up the content of identity, define the essence and substance of it.

It is useful here to differentiate between "means" of identification, which refer to actual things in relation to which identity is constructed, and the "mechanisms" of identity construction, which indicate how identity is

constructed, the process itself and the principle underlying it. For instance, one of the basic principles of identification is based on "comparison between persons or things: *similarity* and *difference*" (Jenkins 2008, 17). In the process of self-definition a person tries "to associate oneself with, or attach oneself to, something or someone" (ibid., 17) by reflecting on his/her similarity with one and difference from another (Weeks 1990, 88).

While employing this basic principle of identity construction an individual uses different means of identification, including the characteristics of individual persons or social collectivities/entities, such as ethnic or national groups, religious communities, political groupings, etc. In that sense, identity markers of a particular social group, the characteristics which support its members' identity claims, (birth, residence, ethnicity, etc.), are means of identification, because they are used as resources to claim a particular identity. Thus, while mechanism of identification refers to just a process of defining oneself, means of identification are actual characteristics to which a person refers during the self-definition process.

There could be various means of identification available for a person, however, as Schwartz et al. (2011, 2) suggest, "definition of identity does not simply encompass all possible characteristics that might be used to describe someone". These characteristics must be used by persons while answering the question "Who am I?". Thus, identity markers "only become part of identity to the extent that they are interpreted and infused with personal and social meaning, and these meanings are applied to define individuals or groups." (Schwartz et al. 2011, 3). On the other hand, identity development is an interactional process, thus the usage of different means of identification is also dependent on the extent to which this usage is accepted and validated by others. In Goffman's (1969) terms, in the process of self-presentation a person's identity "depends for its on-going security upon the validation of others, in its initial emergence and in the dialectic of continuing identification" (Jenkins, 71). So, in order for a simple characteristic of identity existing in theory to become a part of identity it should be firstly, used by an individual as a meaningful identifier for himself/herself, and secondly, the acceptance of this usage from others must be verified.

The definition of an identity as a process rather than as a state, stresses the changeable and flexible nature of identity. Identity of a person may differ in different temporal and spatial contexts. Importantly, identities differ not only within a person but also among different persons. On the first glance, it seems to be obvious that identities of various persons are different from each other. However, if this proposition is narrowed down to exclusively social identity, then it becomes more sensible. The main characteristic of social

identity is that it reflects identification with a social group, which implies similarity of members of a particular group through differentiation from others. Social identity is thought to be a label, which unites people under a common name, a common meaning. For example, as Anderson (2006) has proposed, the nation is an "imagined community," members of which imagine themselves to belong to one national entity, united under a common label.

However, importantly, what is imagined under the same label can differ in case of different individuals. Jenkins speaks about nominal and virtual identity, which is supposed to characterise an ethnic group. The first refers to a name, a label of identity and the latter to the experience of it. As Jenkins (2008, 44) suggests, "it is possible for individuals to share the same nominal identity, and for that to mean very different things to them in practice, to have different consequences for their lives, for them to "do" or "be" it differently".

Cohen (1996, 802) discusses "the personalized nature of the construction and interpretation of the nation". Every individual uses very personal means to construct a national identity and make the labels associated with it meaningful by attributing their own sense to them (ibid, 807). This notion does not suggest, however, that similarities in the perceptions cannot exist. Evidently, they should exist, because individuals are not culturally isolated. As Cohen (1996, 805) himself suggests:

> The histories, literatures, folklores, traditions, languages, musics, landscapes, and foods are social facts on which individuals draw in providing themselves with a shared vocabulary. That is how culture works. Even though these items may be interpreted differently, it is on the sharing of them that the sentiment of and attachment to the nation is predicated. So, when I argue that individuals construct the nation for themselves – that nationalism is personalized – I do not assume their autonomy or cultural isolation.

Thus, despite the existence of shared means of identification, which make a social group one whole, different means can be used by different people in constructing their identities, and moreover, diverse meanings can be attributed to the same identifiers by different individuals, and identity can be personalised.

The City as a Place of Identification – More Inclusionary Social Space?

The definition of urban space proposed here is not limited to its understanding solely as a territorial entity or physical space. Space is also a social and cultural environment. In that sense, "empty", meaningless places do not exist. As Carter et al (1993, xxi) note, physical space becomes place when a meaning is ascribed to it. This ascribed meaning makes an "empty" territorial entity into a meaningful space, which forms the basis for the development of territorial identity. Places are always loaded with social meaning and place identification expresses "membership of a group of people who are defined by location" (Twigger-Ross and Uzell 1996, 206). Thus, in that sense, localized urban identity can be defined as social identity.

Interestingly, as some scholars argue, urban locale can be fertile ground for the development of more inclusionary forms of identity. Various factors contribute to this possibility: more diverse cultural environment, interaction with different social groups, such as people of other ethnicities, representatives of various subcultures, etc. The main point is that the city might offer its inhabitants a possibility "to transcend the exclusionary logics of their national, religious and ethnic backgrounds" (Mueller 2011, 3419). As Mueller argues, "some people may feel that their urban identity offers them a way to claim local belonging where they feel excluded on national or ethnic grounds (ibid.). Thus, it can be assumed, that urban identification implies a community that is open to the membership of others who are different by their nationality, ethnicity, religion, lineage, genealogy, etc..

Here, the differentiation between ethnic and civic nationalism, mentioned earlier has to be brought into focus. As a classic definition suggests, civic nationalism is viewed as a creator of more liberal, voluntarist, universalist and inclusive social environment, whereas ethnic nationalism is considered to be illiberal, ascriptive, particularist and exclusive.[1] (Brubaker 1999, 56).

It can be argued, that in Georgia, especially in certain periods of its independence, the prevalent form of nationalism was ethnic nationalism. As Zedania (2009, 121) suggests, a consistent narrative about the types of Georgian nationalism dominant during the last decade, "tells us that during the first years of independence, ethnic nationalism dominated the political and societal scene; this ethnic nationalism was particularistic and exclusionist, based on principles of blood, kinship and descent". Obvious emphasis on the prominence of ethnic nationalism in Georgia is also argued in other scholarly works. As Nodia (2009, 92) puts forward: "the emphasis on the racial component of nationhood appeared quite strong when the Georgian nationalism

emerged from its state of hibernation under the Soviet rule". It can be convincingly argued that ethnic nationalism is dominant in Georgia to this day.

Examining Tbilisi identity is a way to juxtapose the possibility of overcoming exclusion (associated with ethnic nationalism) with the development of more inclusionary forms of identity (promoted by civic nationalism), in an urban space.

Conceptualizing Identity

The conceptual understanding of identity utilized in this study is based on the distinction between *identity content* and *identity intensity*. Intensity of an identity indicates how strongly is it experienced, whereas the content of identity shows what is the essence of this experience, what components it incorporates, what meanings it involves.

For the purposes of this research, defining city identity broadly was preferred to the creation of just one working definition and adjusting attitudes of the respondents to it. The exploratory approach, which started with the questioning of the existence of Tbilisi identity, could not possibly suggest any a priori definitions. It would be inappropriate to prevent the emergence of themes important to respondents by forcing them to speak about predefined categories or definitions, provided the purpose of the research was not to draw one general conclusion about what constitutes Tbilisi identity, but rather to grasp the diverse means of identification with the city.

The research aimed to explore Tbilisi identity content and answer the main question – *Who is "Tbiliseli"?* – by looking at the following issues:

– What "identity claims" (McCrone et al. 1998) are made by Tbilisi residents to express their Tbilisi identity i.e. what features or characteristics do they name in order to assert and validate their city identity.

– What are the "identity boundaries" (Kiely et al. 2001) of Tbilisi identity in the perception of Tbilisi residents, i.e. based on what criteria are people included or excluded in the "imagined" social borders of the city?

– Based on what "identity markers" (Kiely et al. 2001) is Tbilisi identity attributed and validated?

Identity claims highlight the features that Tbilisi residents attribute to themselves and in that sense demonstrate what elements build up Tbilisi identity content. **Identity boundaries** and **identity markers**, at a first glance, can both be seen as simple inclusion-exclusion criteria. However, a closer look reveals that these features define its meaning – while speaking about identity boundaries and markers people reveal what they consider as the essence of

that identity and relate it to their personal positioning in the urban setting. Identity markers and boundaries represent, therefore, the content of identity itself. Thus, the major research questions are closely interlinked and build up together the content of city identity.

Methodology

The research utilized a qualitative method, namely, in-depth interviewing technique for the purpose of data gathering, which is grounded in the constructionist "mode of understanding of reality" (Kvale 1996). The conceptual understanding of identity, as a fluid, changeable, multidimensional construct and the distinction between the two dimensions of identity – its *content* and its *intensity* mentioned above determined the choice of qualitative methodology. It is assumed that while the intensity of identity can be measured using quantitative techniques, for grasping the content of identity the qualitative method is most suitable. For describing subjective self-perceptions, qualitative methods suited best into conceptual framework of this study. One-to-one interaction in the scope of in-depth interviews was considered as the best setting for getting a detailed account of personal, subjective self-reflections of Tbilisi residents. Research participants were selected using purposive/theoretical sampling, which "seeks out groups, settings and individuals...where the processes being studied are *most likely to occur*" (Silverman 2000, 104).

Here the two dimensions of identity – content and intensity – are brought again into focus. The *content* of identity is expected to be loaded with meaning and more explicit in cases of people who experience it more strongly, thus manifesting a high level of *intensity*. Therefore, the best way for grasping the content of city identity would be interviewing people with a strong sense of Tbilisi identity, because respondents with low levels of city identity simply might have nothing to say about their relation to the city.

Employing such sampling criteria does not suppose that Tbilisi city identity can be examined only through the cases of this target group. On the contrary, based on the definition of identity proposed above, it can be assumed, that the fluid and changeable nature of identity makes it possible for people born and having lived most of their life elsewhere to develop a Tbilisi identity. Conversely, it is not guaranteed that people who have spent a lifetime in Tbilisi will necessarily have a strong city identity and correspondingly, their city identity content will be loaded with meaning. Birth and/or long residence in Tbilisi might not be sufficient conditions for Tbilisi identity development. Thus, it is important to recognize that representatives of

this target group might have very different levels of city identity strength and, perhaps, no Tbilisi identity at all, which again stresses the importance of starting the exploration by questioning the very existence of Tbilisi identity. Therefore, the sampling parameters of the research are based on a theoretical assumption, which defines *one possible case* in which strong city identity is "most likely to occur."

Apart from the criterion of having mostly lived in Tbilisi, the only other sampling criteria applied was that a certain age group (Tbilisi residents aged 28-38) was selected and both genders were involved in the study, in order to get male as well as female perspectives. As for age, it was decided to concentrate on a restricted range (8-10 years) to exclude the possibility of a generation gap between the respondents and ensure shared life experiences.

In total, eight respondents were interviewed within the scope of the study. Even though respondents were selected from different districts and had very different backgrounds, the purpose was not to draw any conclusions based on the personal characteristics of respondents, for instance to pursue explanations based upon neighbourhood or education level. Having respondents with different backgrounds was assumed to be beneficial only in terms of data diversity.

Research Results

Tbilisi City Identity – Does It Exist?

The research results clearly show, there is such a thing as Tbilisi identity, even though a single unified image of a "Tbiliseli" does not exist. The "identity boundaries", which set the limits for the inclusion of people into "imagined" social borders of the city, are quite different in cases of different respondents, and its typical inhabitants, are imagined in very different and sometimes contradictory ways by various study participants.

Respondents attribute Tbilisi identity based on different identity markers. For some respondents only people residing in the central districts are considered to be "Tbiliseli", whereas some respondents attribute Tbilisi identity to the residents of suburbs as well. Some respondents attribute Tbilisi identity based on residence on the right or left embankments of the city or the old districts of town. Some respondents do not consider non-ethnic Georgians as "Tbiliseli", whereas some do not exclude them. These are only some examples where the consensus about the content of Tbilisi identity is absent:

> In Tbilisi you got the left embankment and the right embankment, one living on the right side might say left side is not Tbilisi and

> vice versa… you know… It is difficult to say where Tbilisi starts or ends. (Levan)[2]
>
> Tbilisi is not a small city, it is quite large, but for me Tbilisi is several central districts. The suburbs, which might be also quite old are not Tbilisi in my view. […] Thus, "Tbiliseli" would be one who lives in central areas. (Ana)
>
> The residents of old districts might claim that they are more Tbiliseli than others. (Sandro)

Upon first glance the absence of a consensus over the meaning of Tbilisi identity might seem to question its very existence. However, the diversity of meanings attached to Tbilisi identity does not exclude its existence. Tbilisi identity unifies all these meanings under one label. As Cohen (1996) has argued, identities are personalized, the nation is imagined in different, very personal ways, however, this does not impede the existence of national identity as such, which unifies the nation under one label, even though different meanings are attributed to it. The same notion can be applied to a city, which is simultaneously "both one and many, that is a free space of meaning in which its typical experience assumes many shapes" (Blum 2003, 34). In Jenkins'(2008) terms, the presence of various virtual identities does not contradict with the existence of one, unifying nominal Tbilisi identity.

Below the diverse identity markers identified in the scope of the study are reviewed. As mentioned above, identity markers enable to tap into Tbilisi identity content. Identity markers represent inclusion-exclusion criteria, as long they are used to claim and attribute Tbilisi identity. It can be argued that while speaking about identity markers people reveal what they consider to be the essence of an identity and relate it to their personal positioning in an urban setting. Identity markers reveal, therefore, the content of identity itself.

Who Is "Tbiliseli"? – Claimed and Attributed Tbilisi Identity Markers

According to the research of Mike Savage and his colleagues "people feel at home not according to whether they are "born and bred" in a neighbourhood, but rather according to whether their locale feels right for someone like them. So, belonging is not that of an individual to a fixed community rooted in a place, but rather one in which the place becomes valuable to the individual" (Bottero 2009, 81).

This notion of "elective belonging," which suggests that an individual can choose the place to call his/her own, despite being "born and bred" there, presupposes the understanding of identity not as a fixed status ascribed by

birth but rather as a fluid, changeable construct, which is subject to change during the lifetime of an individual. To link this idea with the discussion presented above, it can be argued that acceptance of the fluid nature of identity can be connected to the openness of a society and higher levels of the acceptance of the "other", which is characteristic for civic nationalism, whereas seeing identity as more rigid can be associated with the exclusionary logic of ethnic nationalism.

As empirical qualitative data collected in the scope of the study suggests, the conception of identity of the interviewed Tbilisi residents tends towards the exclusionary pole. This tendency is evident while looking at identity markers, which they use to claim their urban identity and the ones, which are used for attribution of Tbilisi identity to others.

Tbilisi identity markers identified in the scope of the research can be divided into two main categories:

> **(1) Primary identity markers** which are considered as the basis for identity development and form a necessary condition to claim Tbilisi identity; the person who has these markers is considered to be a real "Tbiliseli".
> **(2) Secondary/Additional identity markers** which are characteristics of Tbilisi residents, however, their mere presence cannot be a solid ground for claiming Tbilisi identity. Even though secondary identity markers may be significant, they do not provide sufficient ground for the attribution of Tbilisi identity.

As research results suggest, spontaneous **Tbilisi identity claims** refer mainly to birth in the city and being raised in the city. These two primary identity markers are further linked with ancestry, lineage, a sense of being rooted in the city and a feeling of being native. As it is evident, fundamental identity claims are mainly based on **primary identity markers** and interestingly, all of them refer to the past, to the roots.

> I would say I am "Tbiliseli". In order to be "Tbiliseli" I think someone before your generation should have lived in Tbilisi. Both of my parents are "Tbiliseli". (Nino)
> I am "Tbiliseli" because I was born and raised here, my parents, grandparent were born here. You are "Tbiliseli" because you know the history of your city, you are a part of it. You have ties with it, it is native to you. You will not have such feelings elsewhere. (Ana)

> I would say I am "Tbiliseli", because I was born here, I was raised here, I know more or less everything. I know the places, streets, almost everything. I went to school here, I have many memories connected with many places. (Salome)
> I would say I am Tbiliseli, because I was born here, I was raised here, I like living here. (Giorgi)
> Yes, I would say that Tbilisi is my city. Because I have been living here all the time, I am local. (Natalia)

As can be seen in the quotes above, identity claims of Tbilisi residents involve some **secondary identity markers** as well. For instance, some respondents, in addition to the birth and ancestry, refer to knowledge about the city, while claiming Tbilisi identity and memories connected with certain places in the city. However, if we look closely, it will become evident that these markers are simply affirming their residence in the city from birth.

Apart from spontaneous identity claims, in the process of self-definition, the participants of the study were employing the basic mechanism of identity construction: similarity-difference (Jenkins 2008). The description of "Tbiliseli" inevitably involved differentiation from various "others" – "non-Tbiliseli," and these narratives revealed a lot about the inclusion-exclusion modalities of Tbilisi identity.

The main point of comparison mentioned in almost every interview were the "arrivals" – Georgians who were not born and raised in the city and have moved to the capital due to various reasons (education, job, other circumstances). "Arrivals" were used as a point of comparison while discussing the content of Tbilisi identity.

One of the identity markers mentioned in almost all interviews was **speech**. Even though this identity marker is not considered to be primary, it is a very distinct characteristic, which differentiates "Tbiliseli" from "arrivals". Speech can be viewed in two different ways: one is the accent specific to the capital and second is the usage of certain phrases and words, which are characteristic for Tbilisi residents.

> The easiest way to identify "Tbiliseli" is speech. An "arrival" who is here for a long time might still be identified by speech. (Salome)
> [My Tbilisi identity] is also evident by my speech, the way I speak. Also, phrases that we use and also certain words. (Ana)
> You can always tell by the accent where a person is from. (Giorgi)
> One more characteristic for "Tbiliseli" is that, as a rule, they speak good Georgian. […] "Tbiliseli" should not speak with an accent, ac-

cented speech can tell you immediately that the person is not "Tbiliseli". (Nino)

Another Tbilisi identity marker was considered to be **a social circle** – possessing friends and acquaintances, who were "Tbiliseli" themselves. This identity marker is again connected with the idea that a person has to be born and raised in the city in order to form a social circle constituting of Tbilisi inhabitants. Interestingly, the possibility of a "new arrival" being part of this circle was not excluded. However, the presence of just this identity marker was not considered sufficient for Tbilisi identity validation.

One further identity marker, which emerged was the **social activity** of Tbilisi inhabitants. This identity marker involves commitment to the city, caring for its environment, e.g. for the preservation of its historical sights, traditional architecture, etc. Social activity for this purpose presupposes a certain emotional attachment to the city and is considered to be an important identifier for real "Tbiliseli". It is worth mentioning here that this secondary identity marker can also be characteristic of a "new arrival".

> Maybe some social activity can be an identifier as well. For instance, if someone very much cares that a hotel should not be built in Vake park or that Elbakidze street should have cobblestones, not because of technical convenience but because traditionally this place has had cobblestones. So, people who care about this tradition in the city, they are also "Tbiliseli". (Nino)

Contradictory thoughts emerged in relation to another identity marker – **Georgian ethnicity**. Some respondents consider being Georgian a necessary identity marker for Tbilisi identity validation. Whereas some respondents think that Tbilisi identity can be attributed to every resident of the city despite their ethnic origin. These respondents often refer to the ethnic minorities residing in the capital, e.g. Armenians from Tbilisi.

> Ethnicity probably does not matter, because Armenians living for a long time here are considered to be a peculiarity of Tbilisi. (Sandro)
>
> Tbilisi, historically, has been diverse. Part of Tbilisi identity has always been a mixture of different ethnic groups, today it might be slightly exclusive, but not for me. (Giorgi)
>
> I think this multi-ethnicity of Tbilisi, was a sparkle of Tbilisi, but not that much right now maybe… (Salome)

The issue of ethnicity is connected with one further characteristic of real "Tbiliseli" mentioned by one respondent. According to him, an authentic feature of Tbilisi residents is the specific "inner culture", social relationships, which imply more openness and tolerance.

> For me being "Tbiliseli" is not a geographical thing. It is not about blood relations. When we speak that Tbilisi should not lose its face, it does not necessarily imply keeping the city green or preserving the balconies. I mean the soul, which implies openness and tolerance. Being "Tbiliseli" for me is how open and tolerant you are. (Levan)

However, it is worth noting that this feature is associated more with the past of the city and currently this feature is considered to be fading.

> I did not mention on purpose the different churches, mosques, synagogues, which are all in old Tbilisi. Because I was told my whole childhood that this was the evidence for people being respectful to different religions. But I do not believe this is the case, especially now. Non-Georgian ethnic groups residing in Tbilisi, get assimilated […] But before we will fully accept them as Georgian citizens, we have a long way to go. (Nino)

One more argument in favour of the exclusionary nature of Tbilisi identity can be based on the attitudes of the respondents themselves. Some respondents are very well aware of the exclusionary nature of their perceptions and admit that they try to overcome such stereotypical way of thinking. The quote below demonstrates this "admission" quite well:

> Despite the fact that I think like that and my inner feeling is like that, I do not think that it is right. These are all stereotypes, we are talking about. These are labels, which you stick to the people and living with these labels is not right, it is easier but not right. […] The less you insert your environment into frames the better for you and for the environment, because you become more tolerant, patient and have less aggression. Living this narrowly is not good for you and for society as well. Because it has negative consequences, like aggression. (Salome)

It is worth noting that, even though, characteristics of real "Tbiliseli" were described in contrast with "non-Tbiliseli", some of the "arrivals" were thought to possess some secondary identity markers of Tbilisi identity, e.g.

knowledge about the city, commitment to the city, etc. These identity markers were regarded as potential for the "arrivals" to become "Tbiliseli." However, even though some respondents were more inclusive in a sense that they were ready to attribute Tbilisi identity to persons who had only secondary identity markers, they also declared that such openness cannot be shared by other Tbilisi residents.

Interestingly, "arrivals" were not expected to claim Tbilisi identity themselves. Some respondents stated that the "arrivals" would not say that they are "Tbiliseli".

> I do not know… I think they will not say that themselves. They won't say they are "Tbiliseli". Not necessarily because they will be afraid that others will say they aren't. Because they won't think that this is their home. (Ana)

This idea was confirmed in case of one respondent, (an internally displaced person), who despite of his long residence in the city did not have any sense of belonging to the city. Spending most of his life in Tbilisi was not sufficient grounds for him to develop Tbilisi identity. On the one hand, the reason for this is his personal attachment to another locality (i.e. Sokhumi). As he explained, the absence of identification with the city was due to the fact that he has not chosen the city as his place of residence voluntarily and that he hoped to go back sometime. On the other hand, the exclusionary social environment of the capital also had a role to play. One might argue that the development of Tbilisi identity in his case was hindered by the exclusionary environment existent in Tbilisi. As Jenkins suggests, a person's identity depends for its ongoing security upon validation of others.

> I would not say Tbilisi is my city. I consider myself an "arrival" and think that I am here for a certain time. And I hope that sometime I might go back. Sokhumi is more my place than Tbilisi. (Sandro)

To sum up, all of the identity markers described above can be divided further into two main categories:

(1) "Ascribed" identity markers – markers, which are ascribed by birth and thus are not "gained" or "achieved" during the lifetime of an individual.

(2) "Achieved" identity markers – markers, which are formed through the activity of an individual, through commitment to the place of

residence, through involvement and engagement with its social environment.

The research revealed that spontaneous identity claims as well as the validation of Tbilisi identity depended on first category of "ascribed" identity markers.

Conclusion

As research results show, primary identity markers, which form a foundation for Tbilisi identity validation are "ascribed" identity markers, such as birth, lineage, ancestry, etc. "Achieved" identity markers, such as commitment to place, engagement with the community or just "falling in love" with Tbilisi are not considered sufficient basis for Tbilisi identity validation. The idea underlying these perceptions is that a person receives definitive identity markers, by birth, rather than develops the identity through engagement with social space of his/her residence throughout the lifetime. To go back to the working definition of identity proposed in the first part of the paper, as research results suggest Tbilisi identity is not seen as a process of becoming (Jenkins 2008), but rather as a status ascribed by birth.

The definition of an identity as a fluid construct, which takes its shape throughout the lifetime of an individual can be linked with an idea that a person is defined by his deeds and not by ancestry. Such understanding of an identity can be considered to reinforce openness of a society and lower the desire to antagonize and exclude people on the basis of their ethnicity, place of birth or other characteristics. These ideas are associated with the notions underlying civic nationalism. Lack of openness and orientation on exclusion is connected with the perception of identity as rigid and resistant to change and can be linked with the ideas of ethnic nationalism.

As research results suggest, Tbilisi residents were "Tbiliseli" by birth and the chances of "arrivals" to become "Tbiliseli," through their residence in the city, were considered quite low, if not impossible. Even though some respondents made statements, which imply more inclusionary forms of identity, their overall evaluation of the social environment of the city tended towards the exclusionary pole. Even though the city is considered to be a place where more inclusionary forms of identity (similar to civic nationalism) can be developed, Tbilisi turned out to be a rather exclusionary urban space where the city identity is claimed and attributed based on "ascribed" identity markers (similar to ethnic nationalism).

While drawing such conclusions it is worth remembering that the research findings are limited in the sense that they express the attitudes of a particular group of people. Despite their dissimilar backgrounds, research participants turned out to have some similar, as well as differing opinions about subject of the research. The similarity or difference of their perceptions could be preconditioned by very different reasons (higher education, similar income, etc.). Whatever the case, what is important to recognize is that these opinions represent one aspect of reality and do not exclude the possibility of alternative ideas. Nevertheless, the purpose of the research was precisely to look at one aspect of social life (Charmaz 2003, 270). The possibility of alternative ideas does not diminish the research findings, because the accounts of the participants are no less real, than possible alternatives.

The study participants touched upon many interesting issues connected with their self-identification with the city, however, there were lots of emergent themes which could be probed further and could lead to a deeper exploration of the city identity. One such theme could be the issue of ethnicity as an identity marker; especially given the contradictory responses of respondents regarding inclusion-exclusion of various ethnic groups (e.g. Armenians) into/from "imagined" social borders of Tbilisi. Also, increasing the sample size and adding new respondents could generate more data and thus more insight. The methodological solution to this limitation could also be re-interviewing research subjects in order to probe interesting issues further and to cover all of the topics that emerged, during the limited one-hour interviews. Such a methodological solution could assist in an in-depth exploration of the diverse urban identifications and could shed more light on the content of Tbilisi identity.

Notes

1. The dichotomy of civic VS ethnic nationalism is used here in a most general, broad sense in order to provide an example of the two poles – inclusive and exclusive social spaces. Thus, it is worth mentioning that the intention here is not to look exclusively at the issue of ethnicity as such.
2. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees were changed into pseudonyms by mutual agreement.

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