

ETHNIC MINORITY ORGANISATIONS IN RUSSIA AND POLAND: A COMPARISON CHALLENGE

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This article proposes a framework for classifying ethnic minority organisations based on a broad combination of discursive and non-discursive criteria rooted in their political opportunities profile. One diasporic and one non-diasporic organisation were chosen for Russia and Poland, respectively. Diasporicity is understood according to William Safran's criteria and Rogers Brubaker's triadic configuration. The Russian study cases are Komi Voityr and the Russian Polish Congress; the Polish, the Silesian Autonomy Movement and the Belarussian House. The analysis of their status, activities, domestic and external political impact, localisation and role in the 'triadic configuration' has shown that the four cases are ethnic minority associations, and their legal status and scope of activities differ significantly. Their domestic political opportunities are rather scarce. Out of the four cases, just one organisation is an active part in Brubaker's classical triadic configuration; its role is not traditional, ascribed to the respective 'angle'. Although both Russian associations enjoy an official status, their activities are limited to the cultural, memorial and linguistic domains, primarily at the national level. In Poland, both associations act internationally as advocacy groups, and their activities are not confined to culture and language. Far from being universally applicable, the proposed classification framework can still add to the comparative ethnic politics toolkit.

Keywords:

ethnic minority, ethnic association, ethnic politics, diaspora, Silesian Autonomy Movement, Komi Voityr, triadic configuration

Literature, methodology, and methods

Ethnic minority organisations in Russia (and the nationalism accompanying their creation and activities) were profoundly studied by Dmitry Gorenburg [1], Guzel Yusupova [2], Konstantin Zamyatin [3], Marat Iliyassov [4], to name

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just a few. The works of prominent scholars such as Raymond Pearson [5], Will Kymlicka [6], and Michael Keating [7] focused on the issue of ethnic minority nationalism elsewhere. However, in this paper, I attempt to shed some light on the difficulty that arises while trying to group ethnic associations: they differ along various criteria, and to compare some cases even within one polity, one has to take into account many dimensions of legal, discursive and political nature. Despite the great salience that is generally attributed in academic writing to the politicization of ethnicity and the activities of ethnic minority organizations [8], quite a few attempts were made to group and classify them according to some more or less universal criteria. Apart from a common distinction between the ethnic associations formed by, respectively, ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities [9], we may name quite a limited number of successful and widespread classifications: for instance, the classification of ethnic communities according to their position at the intersection of institutional resources (weak or robust) and community boundaries (permeable or impermeable) [10], or the classification of ethnic minority coalitions according to their ethnic affiliation (intraethnic or interethnic), level of operation (local, state, regional, or global), public policy sector, and declared goal [11]. In this article, we propose a framework for a classification that would be based on a broader combination of various criteria linked to the profile of an organization's political opportunities in a given polity; a framework that would combine both discursive and non-discursive, subjective and objective characteristics. Though far from being universally applicable, and taking into account the fact that any comparison of human-driven organisations is problematic because of their unavoidably dynamic nature, we hope that this classificatory framework might add to the researchers' toolkit for comparing various ethnic minority organizations.

The works by Benedict Anderson inspired me to understand ethnic community as 'imagined' in the sense that we have to imagine it, being unable to know every member of our group personally [12]. I would also agree with Walker Connor that an ethnic group may be regarded as some sort of an "extended kinship" [13, p. 202]. I would partly support Michael Banton's thesis that ethnically acting individuals usually act within a paradigm of a "rational choice theory" [14]; notwithstanding the fact that in the ethnic consciousness rationality peacefully coexists with a large degree of the irrational.

While selecting case studies for this paper, I had to choose the research design that would fit the complex nature of the ethnic structure of Eastern Europe. Neither MDSO nor MSDO applied 'properly' would perform the task

because of additional endogenous and exogenous factors. So, I decided to take two minority organizations for each of the two countries: one diasporic and one non-diasporic. Walker Connor [15, p. 16] defined diaspora as a “segment of a people living outside the homeland”. To refine the definition, we should follow William Safran’s criteria: the spread of the group from the initial territory of origin into external regions, collective memory about the country of origin, alienation feeling from the accepting population, the myth of a possible return to the country of origin [16, pp. 83–84]. For sure, these definitions of diaspora do not presuppose an inevitably ‘ethnic’ nature of a diasporic group; all diasporic identities are dynamic and multidimensional, and their ‘ethnic’ component might be replaced with some other indicators of “diasporicity”. However, we should admit that “diaspora itself relies on a conception of ethnic bonds as central, but dynamic, elements of social organization” [17, p. 576]. In other words, diaspora is indeed an ethnic phenomenon; nevertheless, the very boundaries of “ethnic” may be understood quite broadly and beyond the primordial paradigm [see also: 18; 19].

An additional criterion may be drawn from the work by Nina Glick Schiller. She supposed that diasporic communities foster “long-distance nationalism”, that is, “a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home”, regardless of how far it is situated from their current place of residence [20, p. 570]. Last but not least, I added a criterion made possible by the geographical closeness of the countries I was going to scrutinize. According to Rogers Brubaker, if a state is trying to become ‘national’, and it has a certain minority group within, it is important, whether this group has “external national homeland” that may (or may not) advocate the rights of this minority [21]. Such triadic configuration is usually expected to appear when an ethnic minority group enjoys certain support from a neighbouring state that is at the same time its “external national homeland”.

Another important dimension of studying ethnic minority communities is whether what we study is an ‘ethnic minority community’, or, in our case, a more or less established ‘ethnic minority organization’. Here I stand on Don Handelman’s four-fold typology of ethnic incorporation. He famously distinguished between “ethnic category”, “ethnic network”, “ethnic association”, and “ethnic community”. In the latter case, the degree of incorporation means having standardized ethnic characteristics, cooperation along ethnic borders, corporative organisation with common goals, and territorial basis [22]. While applying

his criteria to the cases chosen, we see that the diasporic organizations do not match the last “ticking box”, the territorial bases. However, all the organizations chosen for this research, match the criteria sufficiently to be called ‘ethnic associations’.

To sum up, here I aim to study diasporic and non-diasporic ethnic associations partly inscribed into Brubaker’s “triadic configuration”. For this purpose, and bearing in mind the above-indicated criteria, I opted for comparing the “Komi Voityr” organization representing the interests of the Komi people (non-diasporic) and the Russian Polish Congress (diasporic organisation) in Russia with the Silesian Autonomy Movement (non-diasporic organisation) and the “Belarussian House” (diasporic organisation) in Poland. Russia and Poland were chosen as two neighbouring countries with a long tradition of joint co-existence in the Russian Empire and in the “Eastern Bloc”, but at the same time, they are very different qua their current political systems. In the times of the Russian Empire, parts of Eastern Poland were included in the “Russian” territory. In the post-war era, the USSR directly influenced the political system of the Polish People’s Republic (*PRL*), which borrowed many features from the eastern neighbour, for instance, planned economy, ideological domination and repressive apparatus. Now, Poland is a member of the EU and NATO, and it is usually perceived (or constructed) as one of the main antagonists to the growing and threatening Russian influence in Eastern Europe. Its political system is considered far more democratic than the Russian one. However recently, under the rule of the “Law and Justice” Party, the two states show many resemblances - executive authoritarianism, limitations imposed on parliaments and the judiciary, the discursive safeguarding of the so-called “traditional values”, and the overall “illiberal biopolitical conservatism” [23]. I would not dare to say that, out of many examples of ethnic associations in the world, the cases selected for comparison here are the most “exemplary”. Yet they bear all the necessary characteristics that enable us to illustrate, on the one hand, the difficulties associated with comparing ethnic associations across the world, and, on the other hand, the possible applicability of the comparative scheme proposed here.

All the criteria combined, we come to the four cases to be analyzed in the paper. The categorical framework allows us to define (1) the applicability of the concept of ‘diaspora’ to an organisation in question, (2) important characteristics of an organisation that disclose discursive rationales behind its activities, (3) external support that an organisation might enjoy, as well as its orientation inwards or outwards, (4) the organisational type, that is, whether a category of an ‘ethnic association’ might be applicable in a particular case. I summarized the initial features of the organisations I analyzed in the form of a table (Table 1).

Table 1

The cases selected for the study and the sampling criteria

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

In this paper, I attempt to look at the political opportunities of each of the four organisations. This objective should not be confused with the classic concept of the political opportunity structure (POS) formulated by Sidney Tarrow [24]. In Tarrow's view, the POS comprises assessing the openness of the political system, stability of political alignments, availability of potential partners, and political conflicts within the elite. Obviously, these factors are tightly connected to a dynamic change that might be either repressed or facilitated. I aim to indicate the core features defining the status of each association, without digging too much into the surrounding political system context (though, to a certain degree, it is inevitably required). I still call it political opportunities, because I look at what steps the associations in focus are allowed to undertake by their structural position to gain more public power and influence. Nevertheless, I think it is important to note that my research is not situated in a classical POS framework.

Methodologically, this research is a structured and focused comparison of case studies [see 25]. The comparison is based on the analysis of the external and internal context in which the associations operate, namely legal status, the scope of activities, internal and external political impact, the role in the 'triadic configuration', and localization (a more detailed description of the comparison parameters is placed in the "Comparison" section of the article). These lines of comparison make it possible to create a profile of political opportunities for each organisation, and further integrate it into an analytical framework for comparative studies of ethnic minority organisations.

Case studies

“Komi Voityr” (*Komi People* in Komi) was formed in 2002 as a reaction to the legislative collision: the republican law “On the assemblies of the Komi people” was officially revoked as inconsistent with the federal legislation, because “the assembly cannot have the monopoly to represent the Komi people” [26, p. 259]. Now, according to its statute, it is an “interregional public movement”, and it does not aspire to political representation. “Komi Voityr” has branches in all districts of the Komi Republic and in some other Russian regions where Komi ethnic presence is considerable (the Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi okrugs, the Murmansk oblast, Saint-Petersburg, Moscow) [27, p. 60]. It also enjoys the right to legislative initiative, according to Article 75 of the regional constitution of the Komi Republic (adopted in 1994), as an executive body of the assemblies of the Komi people. For sure, this right is limited to the Komi region only. In fact, it has a consultative status, comparable to the status of the “Yasavey” association of the Nenets people in the Nenets autonomous okrug [28].

The regional authorities support “Komy Voityr”’s activities as long as they do not interfere in the realm of the actual political struggle [29; 30]. The main aim of “Komi Voityr” is to support and popularize Komi culture in the republic and beyond. So, for the republican authorities, it is a body that helps to sustain its image of ethnic uniqueness, promote internal tourism as well as foster a ‘special attitude’ to the organisation) as an ethnic unit. In the 1990s, “Komi Voityr” took an active part in the decision-making process, especially in the issues regarding the use and allocation of natural resources, and the elaboration of cultural and linguistic policies of the republic.¹ However, now its activities are confined almost exclusively to the domains of culture and language.² The consultative status does not allow the organisation to act as an independent political actor promoting its candidates at the election and setting a larger agenda; nor can it transform into a political party, because the creation of parties based on ethnic or regional affinity is prohibited by the Russian laws. Article 9.3 of the Russian Federal Law on Political Parties (adopted in 2001) states that “political parties cannot be formed on the basis of professional, racial, ethnic or religious affinity”. However, it has an important opportunity to act internationally as one of the representatives of

¹ Some big companies, whose activities threaten to damage the ecological sustainability of the Komi Republic, still prefer to enlist the support of “Komi Voityr”, to avoid even the least possible risks. For instance, in 2015, the Komi regional branch of Lukoil (Russian energy corporation) signed a cooperation agreement with “Komi Voityr” (the agreement of this kind was also signed with the above-mentioned “Yasavey” association in Nenets Autonomous Okrug). For more detail, see [31, p. 13].

² See: Komi Voityr Interregional Public Movement Webpage, available at: <http://komivoityr.ru> (accessed 15.07.2022).

the Russian Finno-Ugric ethnic communities, even though the position of “Komi Voityr” at international Finno-Ugric congresses is usually in line with the views of the Russian authorities.

The Russian Polish Congress was launched in 1992 as a part of the global “Polonia” [see: 32; 33]. It unites 48 Polish organisations in different Russian cities. The “window of opportunities” for the Russian Polish Congress is scarcer than for “Komi Voityr”. It enjoys the status of “federal national and cultural autonomy”, according to the Russian Federal Law “On National and Cultural Autonomy” of 1996, and any possibility of political action is excluded. Moreover, it can hardly act as an advocacy movement because of Russian political practice. Though the Congress’s leader, Halina Romanowa, is a member of a consultative body by the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs and of the Council for Interethnic Relations by the President of Russia, these positions are of mere symbolic significance. In fact, the Congress is excluded from the ‘triadic configuration’ because of this non-ability to act politically. Since Polish ethnic minority in Russia is dispersed, the Congress’s activities are not concentrated in a particular location. Though both “Komi Voityr” and the Russian Polish Congress are officially registered and have a certain official status, their actions are limited to cultural, memorial and linguistic domains³, primarily at the domestic level.

Silesian ethnic movement is based on the constructivist perception of the Silesian people that present themselves as the ancestors of the indigenous Slavic population of Silesia, i.e., a historical region situated mainly in Poland (Wrocław, Katowice), but also partly in Germany and Czechia. In the 2011 Polish census ca. 809 thousand individuals identified themselves as Silesians⁴. As Józef Koźdoń, one of the founders of the Silesian nationalist movement, wrote, “I am not a German, but neither am I nor want to be a Pole (...). Language community is not a national community. The decisive factor is a spiritual community” [35, p. 31]. The Silesian Autonomy Movement (*Ruch Autonomii Śląska*) was formed in 1990 as an advocacy group to (re)establish the autonomy the Polish part of Silesia had before the war [36]. Officially, it is not a political party but a social movement; however, it participates in the elections as a registered advocacy group.

The main ideology of the Silesian Autonomy Movement is ethnoregionalism, i.e., the claims for more autonomy for particular regions, based on the ethnic

³ See: Russian Polish Congress Webpage, available at: <http://www.poloniarosji.ru/ru> (accessed 15.07.2022).

⁴ *Wyniki Narodowego Spisu Powszechnego Ludności i Mieszkań 2011. Podstawowe informacje o sytuacji demograficzno-społecznej ludności Polski oraz zasobach mieszkaniowych*. Warszawa, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2012. S. 18. In the 2021 Census, no possibility to automatically identify oneself with the Silesian ethnicity was provided, which caused not only a certain distortion of numbers, but also a great resentment among the Silesian ethnic activists [34].

distinctiveness of these regions' population [37; 38; 39]. Classifying it as an exclusionary nationalist movement would not be correct, because the Ruch sees the Silesian people as an "inclusive, pluralist, and variative community" [40, p. 266]. In that instance, the Ruch is to be compared to, for instance, the Scottish National Party: in its discourse, "if you live in Scotland, you are taken to be part of the project that is Scotland — you are taken to be Scottish" [41].

One of the movement's main activities is the organisation of "Autonomy Marches"; the first one took place in 2007. As an organisation with a status quite similar to the one of a political party, the Silesian Autonomy Movement may exert direct influence on the Polish political system. However, since its programme is directed exclusively at a rather narrow circle of Silesian ethnic activists, it has no representation at the national level. Its activities are confined to the Silesian Voivodeship. However, even there, in the Silesian Regional Assembly, the movement was present in 2010–2018 only, with three to four seats. In the incumbent assembly, no seats are allocated to the Ruch. The movement is one of the founding bodies of the Silesian Regional Party (*ŚPR*, established in 2017), which has no representation at any level of governance. Its programme covers various aspects of self-government; hence, it stretches far beyond cultural and linguistic issues. The Movement acts internationally in the framework of the European Free Alliance, an umbrella organisation for independence- or autonomy-seeking parties in Europe [42; 43]; the Alliance is also present in the European Parliament, as a part of the Greens-EFA political group (though the Silesian actors are not represented in the EP directly). The Ruch has several sister organisations in Europe, such as the "Initiative for the Silesian Autonomy" (Germany) and the "Silesian Autonomy Movement" (United Kingdom).

The "Belarusian House" (*Belaruski Dom*) is officially a foundation (*fundacja*, non-governmental organisation), without specific mention in the Polish legal system. It was officially set up in Warsaw in 2012. It maintains close cooperation with other Belarusian diasporic communities. As a non-governmental organisation, the *Belaruski Dom* does not have a direct opportunity to influence Polish internal politics, but it acts broadly as an advocacy group and presents itself as an "alternative embassy" opposed to the current Minsk representatives, with its primary aim "to serve Belarus, not the diaspora" [44]. It is an active part of the "triadic configuration", though it does not perform a classical role ascribed to an ethnic minority organisation; or rather, the Belarusian state in this configuration does not perform the role that is classical for an "external national homeland". Conventionally, some form of cooperation between these two elements of the triadic configuration is anticipated. In the Polish-Belarusian case, it is not cooperation but rivalry, since the incumbent political regime in Belarus is seen as oppressive, and the *Belaruski Dom* tries to create an alternative image of Belarus that should not be associated with the rule of Aliaksandr Lukashenka [45].

After the 2020 post-election protests in Belarus, the *Belaruski Dom* organized numerous campaigns to support political prisoners and other opposition activists in terms of financing, medical care and consultations. It also organized the meeting of opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, with the diaspora representatives in Warsaw. Before and after the 2020 political crisis, the foundation organized numerous cultural and educational activities, such as educational visits to Poland for Belarusian citizens, meetings with Belarusian diasporic writers and journalists, as well as solidarity actions with the people of Belarus. The *Belaruski Dom* also acts internationally, especially in the framework of different EU programmes, such as Erasmus+⁵; for instance, in the summer of 2022 only, the *Dom* organized an educational trip to the European Parliament for Belarussian citizens, meetings with the US Ambassador to Poland, a Lithuanian MEP, and a number of meetings with the Polish MPs, as well as EU4Belarus — SALT funding competition. It might seem that the activities of *Belaruski Dom* do not encompass the Belarusian diaspora in Poland in its broadest; however, it's obvious that these activities are not confined to the youth and students, they are rather directed towards various segments of Poland's Belarussians, including seniors and children. Though both Silesian Autonomy Movement and the Belarusian House have a certain official status, their domestic influence is scarce; however, both act internationally as advocacy groups, and their activities cannot be limited to the domains of culture and language.

Comparison

To compare the cases, I prepared a table that includes the main criteria and the description of the parameters (Table 2). I opted here for such criteria as legal status, the scope of activities, domestic and external political impact, the role in the “triadic configuration”, and localization of the actor. To be sure, I have not used any quantitative formulas to count down the political impact; it would be probably a useful endeavour but not a necessary one for this paper. So, all the criteria suggested and the respective results are based on a raw observation that is outlined above, in the cases section. The criteria of legal status (how an organisation is referred to in official documents), the scope of activities (number of domains where an organisation is active) and localization (geographical representativeness) are based on facts and official documents. However, the assessment of both domestic and external political impact (number and scope of an organisation's achievements in the sphere of domestic and foreign policy, official rights ascribed to an organisation according to the national documents, as well as representation in the official bodies), as well as of the role in the “triadic configuration” (correspondence of an organisation's profile with the Brubakerian model), is more dependent on my personal view of the state of affairs. Nevertheless, this personal view is based on the analysis of associations' websites, social media pages, and media presence.

⁵ Belarusian House in Warsaw Webpage, available at: <https://belaruskidom.eu> (accessed 15.07.2022).

Table 2

Political opportunity profiles of the associations selected

Ethnic Association	Legal Status	Scope of activities	Domestic political impact	External political impact	Role in the "triadic configuration"	Localization
Komi Voityr	Interregional public movement	Cultural and linguistic	The right to legislative initiative stipulated in the regional constitution of the Komi Republic, but now is confined to cultural affairs	Representative of the Komi people in international Finno-Ugric congresses, but the agenda is similar to the official Russian position	None, since there is no "external national homeland"	Primarily the Komi Republic; several local branches in the regions with sufficient Komi ethnic presence, but there, even semi-political actions are impossible
Russian Polish Congress	Federal national and cultural autonomy	Cultural and linguistic, partly also educational	Consultative status by the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, which refrains from any actions in the domain of public policy	None	Insignificant; though all the "angles" are present, since the organisation does not interfere in the political process, it can hardly be considered an active participant in the "triadic" interactions	Dispersed through ca. 50 Russian cities with significant Polish minority; not concentrated in a particular region

<p>Silesian Autonomy Movement</p>	<p>Social movement, acting locally as a political party and in close association with the Silesian Regional Party</p>	<p>Regionalist, electoral; the program covers most public domains related to the Silesian region</p>	<p>An advocacy group for the Silesian autonomy; in 2010–2018, enjoyed small representation at the regional level; as in 2022, no representation at any level of governance</p>	<p>An active member of the European Free Alliance; maintains close relationships with other ethnoregionalist political movements and parties across Europe, including Silesian groupings outside the Polish Silesia</p>	<p>None, since there is no “external national homeland”</p>	<p>Silesian Voivodeship</p>
<p>Belaruski Dom</p>	<p>NGO, foundation (fundacja)</p>	<p>Human rights advocacy, education, political lobbying</p>	<p>Formally none; informally, the centre of the Belarusian diaspora and opposition to Lukashenka’s regime in Poland</p>	<p>Self-proclaimed “alternative embassy of Belarus” in Poland, maintains close relationships with the EU and different international programmes, including educational and human rights projects</p>	<p>Highly important; acts primarily as an external actor representing the alternatives to the incumbent regime in Belarus; facilitates international contacts of the Belarusian opposition. However, the role in the “triangle” is not the classic one (defense of ethnic minority’s rights in a nationalizing state)</p>	<p>Headquarters in Warsaw; however, also active in other Polish cities with significant Belarusian communities</p>

Conclusion

To sum up, all the four ethnic minority associations are very different in their legal status and the scope of activities. Except for the Russian Polish Congress, the associations play an active role in external politics, while at the domestic level their political opportunities are rather scarce. Out of the four cases analyzed, just one organisation is an active part in a classical Brubaker's triadic configuration; however, the Belarusian House does not play a traditional role ascribed to a minority's "angle" in the triangle. Instead of protecting the interests of a presumably oppressed minority (Belarusians) in a nationalizing state (Poland) while conducting tight contacts with the external national homeland (Belarus), it still influences the bilateral Polish-Belarus relations, acting as an influence group pushing for political reforms and counter-regime struggle in the homeland as mentioned above. If we compare separately the two associations based in Russia, though both are officially registered and have a certain official status, their actions are limited to cultural, memorial and linguistic domains, primarily at the domestic level. In Poland, both associations under scrutiny also enjoy the official status, though their domestic influence is scarce. However, they both act internationally as advocacy groups, and their activities cannot be limited to the domains of culture and language.

The sample presented in my paper is far from being representative; however, it is the closer analysis of individual cases that helps to understand the difficulties associated with categorizing and classifying different minority associations, as well as ascribing them to certain 'ideal types'. In the analysis presented above, I demonstrate that individual features and opportunity structures should be necessarily taken into account in particular contexts while trying to build complex and large-scale generalizations. The findings of this short survey are to be further complemented with deeper thematic and discourse analysis, as well as with quantitative research strategies exemplified by a larger cross-national sample. However, I hope that a comparative strategy based on a combination of formal and discursive characteristics rooted in a political opportunities profile, may have some added value for comparative studies of ethnic minority structures.

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