

**Ethno-linguistic identity of small ethnic groups
in the Russian province:
case studies of Poles and Azerbaijanis**

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Abstract

Nizhny Novgorod is a large multicultural city, where more than 100 ethnic groups reside. According to statistics, it is characterised by the dominance of the Russian culture, which has a great influence on the minorities living in the region. Thus, the issue of self-identification of ethno-linguistic groups living in the city as well as the urgent need for identifying alternative factors of the preservation of the language and identity of small minority groups in a modern urbanised environment determine the relevance of the research. Poles and Azerbaijanis were chosen as two case studies in order to demonstrate a variety of factors employed in a self-identification process. These two groups differ greatly in terms of origin, religion, size of the group and support offered by the local authorities. Therefore, the aim of the study was to exemplify the ways different communities use to deal with the

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issues of self-identification and preservation of ethnic identity. The obtained results indicate that various factors mobilise national feelings of the groups and it is possible to preserve ethnic identities and native languages in a modern urbanised environment without the support of official authorities due to a complex approach, based on traditional values as well as modern tendencies, including pragmatic factors.

Key words: ethnic identity, ethno-linguistic group, heritage language, language policy, mobilisation of national feelings.

1. Introduction

Nizhny Novgorod is a multinational and multicultural city situated in the Volga Federal District. According to 2010 Population Census data (*Federal'naya sluzhba...*, 2013), 111 ethnic communities live in the city.

Polish and Azerbaijani ethno-linguistic groups were selected as a subject of this study, as they demonstrate differently directed tendencies related to both revival and assimilation of an ethnic community.

On the one hand, self-identification of both groups might have been negatively affected by the following assimilation factors (Nizamova 2009):

- a relatively small size of the community: 183 Poles, i.e. 0.015% of the total population) and 5614 Azerbaijani, i.e. 0,45 % of the total population (*Federal'naya sluzhba...*, 2013);
- duration of residence in Nizhny Novgorod;
- non-uniformity of the ethnic groups (members of the groups born in their native country, first generation residents in Nizhny Novgorod, and those born and grown up in Nizhny Novgorod).

On the other hand, the chosen groups operate in urban environment in a different way. While Polish ethnic community is a closed group, which is not visible in any way in the Nizhny Novgorod urban space (there are no Polish cuisine restaurants, Polish mass media, schools, etc.), i.e. it has no system of institutes, which would make the Polish group visible in the urban environment, Azerbaijani group is represented in the urban space through its mass media, restaurants and national grocery stores. The members of the group are easily identified by appearance among

other nationalities living in the city. Furthermore, the group has a powerful diaspora and, despite a small community, Azerbaijani as a mother tongue ranks seventh in the number of speakers.

The two groups also differ in terms of their origin, Poles being Europeans, while Azerbaijani coming from Caucasus.

All characteristics mentioned above make the Polish and Azerbaijani ethnic communities an attractive subject of the study for the purpose to answer the following questions:

- What ethnic identity do bilingual members of the community or those who have switched to the majority language claim?
- What does self-identification of the ethnic group hinge on in modern urban environment?
- Is the size of the group as relevant as the efforts made by diaspora in preserving ethnic identity?
- What attempts are made for revival of national feelings and mobilisation of ethnic identity?

2. Conceptual context

Migration to and population concentration in large cities inevitably results in co-existence of many cultures, including religions and languages within a confined space. The superdiversity of urban environment, which has integrated multiple ethno-linguistic groups, transforms, adapting to new conditions, changing the processes of acculturation and self-identification of groups and individuals. Thus, the relevance of this study is caused by the necessity to detect actual motives that help to preserve ethnic identity and language, as well as to mobilise national feelings of small ethno-linguistic groups within the constantly changing environment of a modern Russian city.

The co-existence of a large variety of ethnic communities within one territory occurs in line with specific acculturation strategies. Following R. Redfield et al. (1936), acculturation is understood in this context as a long-term direct contact of groups or individuals having different cultural traditions, which results in changes in

original cultural patterns in one or both cases. According to J. Berry (1997), within the framework of acculturation theory, a group or an individual simultaneously addresses the problem of preservation of their own cultural identity (to what extent the group or individual values and wants to preserve its cultural heritage and identity) and a problem of inclusion or non-inclusion into another cultural environment (to what extent the group is interested in a contact with other neighbouring groups). Depending on the decision taken the group or individual can follow one of the four acculturation strategies, viz. integration, assimilation, separation or marginalisation. Many studies have indicated that integration is the most preferred strategy, while marginalisation is the least preferred one (Regan et al., 2016).

It is worth mentioning that Russia has never been defined as a mono-ethnic society, a nation-state. The Russian state was originally formed as an imperial-type state, uniting under its rule various nations, ethnic groups, cultures and religions. Thus, the long-term coexistence within the unified political structures, unified systems of education and upbringing led to a convergence of mentality, especially among members of older generations (Nesterov 2017). Thus, multiculturalism in Russia is the autonomous coexistence of various cultures in single space, while maintaining their characteristics, traditions and customs (ibidem). V. Tishkov (2003) argues that the essence of an ethnic community (people, ethnos) is formed on the basis of cultural self-identification in relation to other communities.

Within the framework of studies devoted to self-identification processes, the issue of the application of native languages of ethnic groups becomes especially relevant. Social and cultural integration and identity formation processes are closely related to the language as a main marker of group affiliation (Redfield et al., 1936; Berry 1997; Noels 2013). Individuals demonstrate their own cultural identity as a discursive phenomenon (McAvoy 2016; Zotzmann, O'Regan, 2016), as well as their belonging to a specific group (Joseph 2004; Cashman 2005) through the discourse and language practices.

Following the opinion of N. Elias (1991), it can be assumed that identity is not "once and for all", but it results from the evolution within a specific context in which an individual finds himself/herself. Therefore, individuals may use various behav-

journal strategies to demonstrate negative identity rejected by the majority or to make attempts to fully assimilate in majority society. Individuals with the most ambiguous ethnic identities are usually those who live outside the traditional place of inhabitan-
cy (O'Connor 2017).

Urban and global subcultures, as well as various ethnic groups living side by side, influence ethnic self-identification in a city, viz. their self-ascribed identity defined by an individual depending on circumstances (García 2012). There is also another type of identity that can be found in urban culture – the imposed identity, realised in a specific context through ideology and language policy (ibidem).

J. Fishman and O. Garcia (2010) argue that there is no “true” identity, though there are more or less effective, obvious or hidden identities depending on the context. In a modern city all ethno-linguistic groups finally find themselves on an equal footing, constantly facing other subcultures and languages, accepting or rejecting elements of “strange” or “imposed” identity, that finally enables to consider ethnic identity in the urban environment as mobile, situational and multiple (Revina 2008).

Modern ethnic identity is a complex concept that affects both the group and each individual who considers himself/herself a part of this group; it is a part of multiple social identity, which in the context of a modern urbanised society is assigned an important place. Therefore, it can be assumed that in order to preserve ethnic identity in modern conditions a comprehensive approach, which involves alternative factors of group integrity, contribute to traditional factors, e.g. language, religion, or parental nationality, is required.

Thus, an increasing concern among scholars about the impact of the urban environment on self-identification of ethnic groups should be foregrounded (Vertovec 2006; Revina 2008; Nizamova 2009; O'Connor 2017). However most domestic studies devoted to the issue of self-identification are limited to the regions of compact minority groups or refer to native peoples of national and cultural autonomies (Sokolova 2004; Khilkhanova 2007; Nuksunova 2007; Nizamova 2009; Hantaeva 2010; Bedrik 2016), while no due attention is paid to disperse small nationalities in other regions. In this article, an attempt is made to fill the gap in Russian socio-linguistic research

by means of studying small ethnic communities in a region characterised by the dominance of the Russian language and culture.

3. Language policy in Nizhny Novgorod

Before analysing the cases of two minority groups in detail, it is essential to highlight the role of local authorities in promoting multiculturalism and preserving the native languages and cultures of minority groups.

In the context of urban multiculturalism, local authorities are called upon to support and promote the interests of ethnic groups living in the city through various activities conducted within the framework of language policy.

Based on the data provided in official sources, it can be concluded that the authorities of Nizhny Novgorod pursue a certain language policy that promotes free functioning of minority languages and is aimed primarily at interethnic and interfaith interaction in the urban environment. The elements of this policy are included in the overall national and ethnic political agenda and delegated to local self-government. For instance, the Commission on Social Policy and the Commission on Local Self-Government are responsible for dealing with the issues of interethnic relations. Moreover, the City Administration departments oversee language policy issues.

It is also worth stressing that a whole range of activities aimed at maintaining and developing cultural traditions of minority communities in Nizhny Novgorod are carried out regularly. In recent years, traditional interfaith and interethnic community clean-up events have been held (in the Victory Park on the Embankment of the Rowing Canal, in the Internationalist Square, etc.), which certainly strengthen interethnic communication in the city. Ethno-cultural festivals and festive events of national communities of the city are held annually (e.g. the ethno-cultural festival *Navruz*, the festive event of the National Cultural Centre of the Peoples of Dagestan and the Nizhny Novgorod branch of the Russian Children's Fund dedicated to the memory of Rasul Gamzatov, the ceremony of consecration of the Armenian Church of Surb Amenaprkich (the All-Saviour, etc.). Many schools celebrate Friendship Day and Tolerance Day.

It should be highlighted that the municipal program “The development of forms of public self-government, social activity of the population, interethnic and interfaith cooperation in the city of Nizhny Novgorod” for 2017-2019 has been aimed at implementing a set of activities (conferences, round tables, religious and national holidays’ celebrations, sports events, educational programmes) in collaboration with national-cultural organisations and religious associations of the city.

Thus, the measures presented above demonstrate that certain attempts are being made to popularise the cultures of national minorities and facilitate their integration into the cultural space of the city. However, as authorities cannot support all the groups living in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, they have to prioritise preferring to collaborate only with those that make themselves visible in urban environment and have a powerful diaspora or another official form of organisation.

4. Materials and methods

Due to a relatively small size of the sample, questionnaire, as well as structured and unstructured interviewing were the key techniques employed in the study.

In order to answer the research questions, a survey was conducted in which 110 representatives of the Azerbaijani diaspora of Nizhny Novgorod took part. The sample included 40% of men and 60% of women in various age groups from 16 to 49. Continuous sampling method was applied to the participants, the Azerbaijani ancestry being the only selective criterion.

In order to get more accurate understanding of language practices of the Poles a questionnaire study was held, as a result of which 27 people in the age from 19 to 56 years, including 15 men and 12 women, 6 students of higher education institutions and 21 people with higher education. Twelve people answered the questions in person and 15 in social networks. People questioned remotely were the members of the Polish Culture Association “Polonez”. Some questions varied depending on the native language of the respondent. Thus, in order to make the results more reliable some interviews were conducted with the members of the Polish community. These included a priest of a Polish Roman Catholic church located in Nizhny Novgorod; sisters of the church, citizens of Poland and Polish language native speakers; the

Head of the Polish Culture Association “Polonez”, the Deputy Head of the Polish Culture Association, professor of the Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod, and 30 members of the Polish community.

5. Data and analysis

5.1. Poles

The history of the Poles in Nizhny Novgorod Region goes back to Dmitry Pozharsky who founded a monastery for the captured Poles in Purekh village granted to him (*Rossiysko-pol'skie...*, 2014). It also seems relevant to mention a flow of exiled Poles who passed through Nizhny Novgorod Region (Chernykh 2009) and partially settled there in the 16th to 20th centuries. Nizhegorodsko-Tyumensky highroad was an important transport pass in the Russian Empire (Varentsova, Varentsov, 2013), and a lot of prisoners conveyed to Siberia went through Nizhny Novgorod Province after the defeating the Polish uprisings in 1830-1831 and 1863. Since 1915, the Polish refugees have settled almost on the entire territory of Nizhniy Novgorod Province. Although more than 10,000 of Poles lived in the province (*Rossiysko-pol'skie...*, 2014), there were no Polish hotbeds there. The dispersed distribution of the Poles may be considered one of the key factors relevant to the issue of native language loss or preservation. Over time, the number of Poles decreased and in 1970 there lived 907 people in Nizhny Novgorod Region who identified themselves as the Poles (*Narody permskogo kraya...*, 2014), only 615 in 2002 and according to 2010 Population Census data, 183 people identifying themselves with the Polish ethnic group lived in Nizhny Novgorod (*Federal'naya sluzhba...*, 2013).

Although the size of the Polish ethnic group is small, today there is a number of organisations providing support to the Polish language and other aspects of culture in the city. These includes:

- the Centre of the Slavic Languages and Cultures (in the Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod) – (*Centr Slavyanskikh yazykov...*, n.d.); apart from the Polish language courses, the Centre arranges Days of the Polish Culture, Polish film festivals and meetings with the prominent Polish figures;

- the Polish Culture Association “Polonez” – Nizhegorodsky Regional Public Organization (*Nizhegorodskaya Poloniya...*, n.d.) which declares as its main aim to improve the Russian-Polish relations at the interpersonal communication level and to unite everyone who is interested in Polish culture, including history and language; the organisation also supports various events aimed at promotion of Polish culture and consolidation of the Polish community;
- the Roman Catholic parish of the Virgin Mary Assumption.

The study indicated that the Polish ethnic group is not homogeneous and consists of at least two subgroups, each having its own features. The first group constitute of the Poles who were born in Poland (first generation Nizhny Novgorod residents) – the Polish native speakers. They are mainly personnel and members of the church, both Russian citizens and persons without Russian citizenship. The second group constitute of the ethnic Poles, descendants of exiled Poles or later migrants; they have Russian citizenship, were born and grown up in Russia, and do or do not speak Polish.

The members of both groups were surveyed, and the results obtained demonstrate (Table 1) that all the Poles who were born in Poland and live in Nizhny Novgorod (whether they are the Russian citizens or not) identified themselves as Polish. Two of nine respondents claimed their native language to be Russian, which could be explained by a long period of living in the Russian Federation (over 20 years). There is an opposite tendency among the Poles born in Nizhny Novgorod: nearly 70% of them recognise themselves as Poles, although only 18 respondents declare Polish as their native language. However, it should also be noted that only three of 18 respondents of the second group were not interested in learning the Polish language at all. Therefore, the social demand for the Polish language is rather high in this group.

Table 1. Results of questionnaire inquiry of the Polish minority groups

Question	First generation residents of Nizhny Novgorod (9 persons)	Ethnic Poles (18 persons)
Age and sex	Males 3, females 6	Males 12, females 6
Education level	Higher 9	Higher 12 Incomplete higher 6
Employment status	Employed 9	Employed 12 Students 6
Russian citizenship	Yes 3 No 6	Yes 18
Ethnic identity	Polish 9	Polish 13 Russian 5
Native language	Polish 7 Russian 2	Polish 2 Russian 16
Polish proficiency	Can speak 9	Can speak 7 Cannot speak 11
Intra-familial communication language	Polish 7 Russian 2	Polish 2 Russian 16
Do you consider learning Polish/Russian interested? Do you attend language courses?	Speak both languages 3 Consider learning Russian: interested 3 Already learn Russian 3	Speak both languages 7 Consider learning Polish: interesting 5 Already learn Polish 3 Not interested in learning Polish 3

The interviews revealed the lack of cooperation between two central organisations aimed at consolidation of the Poles in Nizhny Novgorod, which probably precludes the development and self-identification of the Pole ethnic group. As the respondents admitted, the administration of the church (Roman Catholic parish) has not vested due interest in creation of the parish-based Polish community over the

years. On the other hand, the founder of the Polish cultural centre “Polonez”, being an agnostic, declares his willingness to cooperate with the church. In September 2017, the parish received a new priest and, may be, the two organisations would be able at last to cooperation for the benefit of the Polish community.

The pragmatic aims of the community members connected with the revival of the national feelings and language should be highlighted. The majority of respondents speak Polish, learn Polish or consider it interesting and necessary, and this factor may be crucial for the preservation of the Polish language among the ethnic Poles of Nizhny Novgorod.

The evidences suggest that the increasing interest in the Polish language and culture in general is primarily associated with the growing prestige of the European Union and the Europeans in general. Besides, there is another incentive to learn Polish, viz. the acquisition of the Pole’s Card, the main goal of which is to support relational, ethnic and lingual values of the Polish people in the Community of Independent States (CIS) and Baltic states, and, implicitly, to recruit migrant labour of similar culture in Poland. Thus, the Pole’s Card gives the right of repeated entry in Poland and other European countries (a limited list) without a visa, 37% discount on rail transport in Poland and Germany, as well as possibility to work in these countries. Studies conducted in other regions of Russia confirmed such instrumentalist attitude of the Polish diaspora members to ethnic identification (Bedrik, Serikov, 2016).

5.2. Azerbaijanis

The first Azerbaijanis arrived in Nizhny Novgorod region in the early Middle Ages, when merchants and travellers were floating along the Volga. Since the development of the famous Nizhny Novgorod Fair at the confluence of the Oka and Volga rivers, Azerbaijani merchants opened their shops and representative offices there. Moreover, thanks to the efforts of the Tatar Ahun Samirkhan Sokolov, an Azerbaijani mosque was founded in Nizhny Novgorod. At that time, Azerbaijani were actively operating in Nizhny Novgorod. For example, the well-known Ali Mardan bey Topchibashev, who was the first chairman of the Muslim faction in the State Duma of Russia in 1906 and the chairman of the first All-Russian Muslim party Ittifak, which

was created in Nizhny Novgorod in 1906. That was the first stage of Azerbaijanis integration in Nizhny Novgorod region.

Later, the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) caused a massive migration within the former state. The large industrially developed city of Nizhny Novgorod became a place of attraction for immigrants from the Caucasus. Thus, tens of thousands of migrants settled in Nizhny Novgorod.

The sharp changes in the socio-economic environment after the collapse of the USSR forced the members of the Azerbaijani elite to take measures to structure their community. The first Azerbaijan Cultural Centre, headed by Vidadi Mirzoyev, appeared in Nizhny Novgorod in 1995. Its main function was to develop relations between Azerbaijanis and members of other indigenous groups of Nizhny Novgorod to promote tolerance.

Today the following national organisations operate in Nizhny Novgorod, maintaining and developing the culture and language of the Azerbaijani ethnic group.

(1) The Local National Cultural Autonomy of Azerbaijanis (MNKAA) – an organisation aimed at supporting the Azerbaijani language and culture in general and the development of the Azerbaijani diaspora of Nizhny Novgorod. MNKAA exists since 7 July 2006. It has its own council that consists of influential and educated Azerbaijanis of Nizhny Novgorod. The Council controls the activities of the leaders of the autonomy and takes an active part in the life of the Azerbaijani diaspora of Nizhny Novgorod.

(2) The Azerbaijani Sunday School, where children can learn reading and writing in the Azerbaijani language. Adults could also attend the school.

(3) The newspaper “Azzeros”, which, until 2011, was available both in electronic and printed form. Today, the traditional newspaper has transformed into an electronic one – the analytical portal “Azzeros”, which contains headings: “in the world”, “economy”, “sports”, “culture”, “community”, “ethnic issues”, and “science”.

(4) A youth organisation Local National Cultural Autonomy of Azerbaijanis (MNKAA). The Azerbaijani youth of Nizhny Novgorod hold round tables, confer-

ences, participate in festivals not only in Nizhny Novgorod, but also in other cities of Russia. Currently, several members of the council are members of the commission of the regional coordination council of the United Russia party. The MNKAA takes an active part in all projects and forums conducted by the city and the local administration, as well as various public organisations, and it is the largest association of Azerbaijanis in Nizhny Novgorod and the region.

Thus, the Azerbaijani community is explicitly seen in urban environment demonstrating their culture, including traditions and language. They are perceived as a group of labour migrants that occupy a certain niche in economic realm of the city.

Table 2. Questionnaire results of Azerbaijani diaspora

Do you have Russian citizenship?	Yes 79 % No 21 %
What is your ethnic identity?	Azerbaijani 97% Russian 3 %
What language do you consider native?	Azerbaijani 77 %, Russian 23%
Do you know the Azerbaijani language?	Yes 100%
What language do you speak at home? And in the company of people of the same nationality?	At home: Russian 10 % Azerbaijani 34% Both languages 56 % With friends: Azerbaijani 100%
Do you use Azerbaijani at work?	No 100%
Do you find it interesting / necessary to study the Azerbaijani / Russian language?	Both languages 100%
Do you watch films in Azerbaijani, do you listen to the radio?	Yes 61% No 39 %

In order to answer the questions a survey it was decided who of the 110 representatives of the Azerbaijani diaspora of Nizhny Novgorod aged between 16 to 49 years of age select. The questionnaire questions and results are presented in Table 2.

All Azerbaijanis interviewed know their native language, appreciate it and are interested in its preservation and promotion. However, all respondents also speak Russian, and for 23% of them it has already become a mother tongue. Thus, it seems that a shift is being observed from Azerbaijani monolingualism to bilingualism, where Azerbaijani is the first language and Russian is the second one. A gradual loss of the everyday sphere of communication (which is, in fact, the only domain where the language still fully functions) can be looked upon as the first step towards a reduction of the number of native speakers as the family plays a decisive role in preserving the native language, ensuring its transmission from generation to generation.

Among the reasons to take care of the native language are the feeling of belonging to a powerful diaspora, religion and respect for older generations. Thus, despite the already noticeable collective lingual shift towards Russian, there is a high level of motivation among community members to preserve their native language and culture in general, which suggests that the vitality of the Azerbaijani language in Nizhny Novgorod, at least in the next generation, does not raise concern.

6. Conclusion

The presented investigation is devoted to the examination of two minority groups living in a large industrial city in the Russian province. The findings confirm the opinion of V. A. Avksentyev (2001) that ethnic groups are stable intergeneration social systems and the change of some elements of the systems will not necessarily result in loss of systemic features of the entire ethnic group. The evidence suggests that in the urban environment, under external factors, an individual and an entire ethno-linguistic group are able to maintain their ethnic identity, although some of its elements are transformed and adjusted to new conditions while others are lost. Individual and group identification is supported by the high status attributed to the group, its sponsoring by powerful institutions, public organisations and representation in the urban public space and its social life.

Answering the questions raised in the study, the following conclusions can be formulated.

(1) If the language is lost, the self-identification relies on other factors, e.g. parental nationality, religion and culture in general, powerful diaspora, the increasing group prestige and related pragmatic factors. Bilingualism in modern urban environment is definitely not an obstacle for preserving ethnic identity.

(2) The evidence suggests that the size of the group does not play any significant role in preserving ethnic identity, while efforts made by community certainly do.

(3) A revival of national feelings depends primarily on the background and the image of the group.

With respect to the Polish ethno-linguistic group it can be concluded that ambiguous status of the ethnic group (who may neither be classified as indigenous ethnic group of Nizhny Novgorod Region nor as new migrants), the lack of explication in the city space, small size and a lack of developed diaspora exclude this group from the focus of official language policy as the city authorities tend to support and encourage the promotion of the groups that have significant representation in the city and strong associations (non-commercial organisations, diaspora centres, etc.). Therefore, the responsibility for preservation of culture, including and language and self-identification lies on the members of the group, public organisations, religious institutions and, probably, the mother state.

Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, enjoy official support and thus, the efforts of the members of the group are sustained by the efforts of the community; bottom-up tendencies are in line with the top-down ones. However, life in the foreign urban environment impacts language practices of the group under investigation.

In general, the study shows that even in case of small closed ethnic groups not supported by public authorities it is possible to preserve ethnic identity and language in the modern urban context. However, the factors that are deemed crucial for identity preservation (including language, religion, parental nationality, etc.) appeared to be unviable compared to the pragmatic factors in this case.

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wpłynęło/received 08.08.2021; poprawiono/revised 03.11.2021