

National Identity and Patriotic Attitudes: A Case of Lithuanian School Students

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This paper discusses the situation of people in the current modern nation state in terms of their relation to their own nation and state. They are situated between patriotic and economic interests, between individual rights and national interest, between empirical needs and abstract requirements. These tensions, described more elaborately in a previous article, are illustrated by the research of focus groups on the attitudes of Lithuanian school students. A majority of students was found to prefer economic and personal motivation over patriotic. Historical education based on comics was tested as a way to implement more patriotic attitudes.

Keywords: modern national identity, nationalism, patriotism, comics

INTRODUCTION

Nationalism as a modern form of being combines modern individual consciousness and will, including an elevated cultivation of ethical, political and economic character, with rational techniques of combining and governing these wills as a unified political whole (body politic). Pre-programmed in such an arrangement is the dialectic of liberal spirit and centralising political tendencies. Likewise, a modern nation-state is a paradoxical combination of a romantic myth of the nation and a rationalist or even scientific form of economic and political organisation. Also, the more 'rational' or abstract the founding principles, the more the need of more concrete empirical reality is felt as lacking. Thus, a modern human being as a modern individual is situated between a duty to his/her nation(-state), the requirements and pressures of modern economic activity, liberal human rights (often understood as supranational) and the needs of a human as a bodily empirical being. Although an individual identifies with his/her nation, patriotism tends to be weakened by the fact that a modern state to which he/she belongs tends by its very constitution, as noted by Alasdair MacIntyre, to deprive him/her of an (empirically concrete) community and to frustrate many of his/her projects.

The empirical research presented in this paper can be seen as an empirical test of the considerations presented in the previous article (Mitkė, Stasiulis 2022). It employed the focus group research tool to find out the attitude of school students, 5th grade and 10th grade, towards defending a nation-state in war as a measure of patriotism. The standard of patriotism was set by the historical example of Lithuanian Freedom Struggles (*Laisvės kovos*), or Wars of Independence, in the years 1918, 1919 and 1920 which was presented to them as a material of

their history lessons in the novel form of comics. Additionally, the effectiveness of comics in setting up patriotic attitudes was put to the test. Incidentally, part of the focus group research coincided with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine where Lithuania's national interest is also seen to be at stake with a possible need for citizens to participate in military defence. School students were asked to express their own attitudes and motivations and to compare them to patriotic attitudes and motivations of Lithuanians who participated in the wars of 1918–1920.

THE SET-UP OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Qualitative research seeks an in-depth understanding about a social phenomenon rather than to count and measure different variables. Focus group is but one of many tools that research can employ to gain insights into the thoughts of others. It is favoured when researchers want to get insights from respondents that only debate within the group can provide (Azzara 2010).

Focus group can be regarded as a specific research tool within qualitative methodology with its own form of methodological criteria, as well as its own procedures (Ivanoff, Hultberg 2009). Thus, a focus group is a type of in-depth interview that is accomplished in a group, whose meetings present characteristics defined with respect to the proposal, size, composition, and interview procedures (Mishra 2016). One of the key elements of this approach to data gathering is an active interaction of the group (Belzile, Öberg 2012). It is important to address that participants influence one another through their answers and expressed ideas, insights, and perceptions during the discussion. The interviewer directs and stimulates the discussion with comments or additional questions. Usual data gathering approaches are transcripts of the group discussions and interviewer's notes and reflections.

The term 'focus' is important as it emphasises that discussion conducted in the group has a precise topic of interest rather than broad subjects (Boddy 2005). And, as Masadeh (2012) points out, the primary goal of focus group sessions is not to generalise but simply to help develop a set of questions to be asked in the subsequent questionnaire. Thus, the focus group tool is exploratory in nature. This technique is particularly useful when the topic has been researched minimally (Nassar-McMillan, Borders 2002).

This article presents a focus group interview with 4 groups of school students (two groups from the 5th and the 10th grade) in the academic year of 2021–2022. The focus group interviews were executed in order to identify how effectively comics of historical genre can be used as an additional educational tool. It is important to note that the idea of comics as an additional educational tool is not new and has been discussed extensively in the past (Berkowitz, Packer 2001; Tatalovic 2009; Araya, Pena, Leiner 2021); comics have even been tested as a means of communication in scientific and cultural institutions (e.g. museums; Tatalovic 2009), in primary schools (Farinella 2018; Herbst et al. 2011) and secondary schools (Roussou et al. 2019; Wallner, Barajas 2020). However, Farinella (2018) noticed that a lot of this research is done in the classroom by teachers who are also authors of comics and with a small and possibly biased sample size. Therefore, Farinella argues, 'while comics have been studied as a tool for classroom education, their application to the specific challenges of science communication remain largely unexplored' (2018: 1).

Thus, this article presents an empirical test of the effectiveness of comics of historical genre in the history class. It is important to note that what separated this test from those indicated above is that the interviewer did not work at that school, and, thus, had no previous relationship with the students. Additionally, this test used a control group in order to be able to compare the results between the class that has read the comics and the one that did not.

The test was conducted with two different grades (the 5th grade and the 10th grade) because only these two grades (with the exception of the final year students who were excluded from the test due to their intense preparation for the school-leaving exams) were covering the same historical topic during the classes and used the Lithuanian comics chosen for the test. Choosing two different grades also provided an opportunity to compare the effectiveness of comics as an additional educational tool for different age groups.

Students of both grades were provided with the comics (one for each student) and were given a few weeks to read it. The comics was a graphic novel (roman à clef) about the Lithuanian Wars of Independence (period of 1919–1920). Then focus group interviews were conducted with the two student groups – one that has read the comic and one that has not. The session with the 10th graders was conducted on 6 December 2021 and the sessions with the 5th graders on 25 March 2022. The sessions were conducted during their history lesson and lasted for an academic hour (45 min).

During these sessions, each of the groups was asked a set of 15 questions and the groups which had read the comics were asked an additional set of 6 questions. Answers given during the interviews led to an additional and focused discussion on the way the youth perceived their modern national Lithuanian identity.

The questions the answers to which encouraged the discussion were the following: *Do you think that people of your age in Lithuania a hundred years ago were different from you or they were similar?* and a clarification question, *Would you behave differently in their place?* The initial goal of the test was to find out if the comics can help develop students' historical thinking as well as re-elaborate and renegotiate the meanings of the concepts studied as Weber et al. (2013) suggested.

THE OUTCOME OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Due to the geopolitical position of Lithuania, it is always under a threat of being attacked by Russia. Such possibility is further highlighted with every Russian attack on other former Soviet Republics (Russian–Georgian War in 2008, 2014 Russian Annexation of Crimea and 2022 Russian Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine). Thus, the question of what one would do in the case of a Russian attack is not merely theoretical but also practical in real terms. It is repeatedly discussed in-depth in Lithuanian schools with students also outside this research.

Thus, the question is immediately equivalent to the question of whether one would defend the country in the event of an (Russian) attack and understood as such by the students interviewed during this research. Three of the four student groups were asked whether they would defend the country (with a gun), would not do that under any circumstances or were not sure.

Among the 10th grade students, the first group (the one that had read the comics) students stated firmly that they are different from the youth that fought in independence wars – much less patriotic than the youth one hundred years ago. According to the students, they are much more accustomed to good life than their peers a hundred years ago which thus must have had a stronger motivation to fight for independence than they themselves currently do. When countered with the argument that they, with their supposedly better life, had more to lose, the students simply avoided the discussion by stating that their 'weak patriotic position is not ideal'.

In the course of the discussion, 4 students stated that they would defend the country and 9 would not do so under any circumstances, 15 were not sure. The rest of the discussion on

the topic of the patriotism with the focus group consisted of just repetitive statements that the students understand why the youth 100 years ago were so patriotic but they would not share the sentiment in the case of invasion.

The session with the second 10th grade group (the one that had not read the comics) was different because this group of students held very strongly that virtually all soldiers that participated in the Lithuanian Independence War were motivated solely by the economic factor (they were promised land) and not because of patriotic feelings. After the session, this insight of the group's view on the motivation of the Independence War participants was presented to the group's teacher. According to her, she knew exactly which statements in the history textbook led to such a position, although she also stated that it was a clear misinterpretation of the text.

Importantly, discussion with the 5th grade students was conducted a few months later, hence, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine which can be assumed to have affected the students' minds. The first group (that had read the comics) stated that Lithuanians 100 years ago were very different from them, with the recurring statement that they were much more patriotic and appreciative of what they have. The follow-up question during the ongoing discussion was stated ambiguously: Would they act in a similar fashion if Lithuanians were attacked? The students (around 11 years old) misunderstood it to ask if they would do that currently, at their current age (importantly, international law forbids youth participation in any military activities). Few students quickly stated that they would because the reports on current events had convinced them that war does not discriminate children. Others clarified that they would not participate in military action at their current age but would defend if they were older. The third block of answers stated that they would participate in defence only if the risk of dying would not be high (and in that case would choose to help out in different ways). And the final group of answers stated that they most likely would not participate in the defence as it is a very dangerous activity. A lot of girls also expressed their inclination to actively participate in the defence of the country, which is quite different from the 10th grade where the absolute majority of the girls abstained from expressing their position one way or the other. Finally, around 4/5 of the group thought that the key motivation that led people to participate in the independence wars in 1919 was the promise of land.

The final group of students (5th grade that had not read the comics) mostly shared the perception of Lithuanians 100 years ago as different from them because, according to the students, they did not have current technology and/or were more united. When asked the question if they would defend Lithuania from an invading force (the interviewer clarified this time that the question was directed at them in the future as legal adults), 2/3 stated that they would actively participate in the defence. This group was also the only one that did not mention the land payment as motivation when the discussion turned to the question why the youth a hundred years ago decided to participate in the Independence War. However, when additionally asked how many of them believe that an economic motivator (the land) was important in deciding to participate in the Independence War, 2/3 of the group raised their hands.

In addition, an opinion was expressed that defence would be pointless because of too great Russian military power ("Russian bombs would wipe out all the cities"). Also, the students who did not intend to participate in the defence did not mean capitulation but emigration to safer regions.

DISCUSSION

The previous article presented the tensions between the devotion to the state and the devotion to personal pursuit of happiness. It showed that a modern nation-state is situated between an abstract ideal of a modern state and the notion of individuals as primary building blocks of any society, and that there is a possibility of conflict between the two approaches. More specifically, a communitarian perspective revealed that capitalism upon which modern states are based promotes an individual economic success above all and subverts an individual devotion to the community. If this philosophical approach is turned into an empirical hypothesis, then this hypothesis can be said to be (at least in part and preliminarily) verified or illustrated by the research presented in this article. It is natural for the students interviewed to raise economic motivation above patriotic motivation in considering their own behaviour as well as interpreting the behaviour of others (the 'more patriotic' Lithuanians a hundred years ago). The other tension, presented in the previous article, is between a classical approach to the nation-state and a more recent liberal approach, which corresponds to the distinction between a) a more holistic approach of belonging to a nation with a strong emphasis on 'the past', that is, nation-binding historical narratives and b) a more 'globally sensitive' approach with an emphasis of individual human rights and a political project based on civic liberties. The empirical findings of the focus group interviews can be said to illustrate the dilemma and point to the need of an approach which combines personal freedom or happiness and belonging to a community.

No significant difference of opinion was noted between the groups which read the comics and which did not. First, the absolute majority of all the students (both 10th graders and 5th graders) prioritise a 'pragmatic' attitude. In other words, the majority of participants do not think that defending their country in war is an important part of belonging to the community (the nation). Prioritising the 'economic' motivation was higher even among the 5th graders whose minds had been freshly affected by the news of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

The students generally did not identify themselves with the Lithuanian nation-state to the point where they would consider risking their lives to defend its statehood.

CONCLUSIONS

The focus group research indicated that identifying with one's nation as a community with clearly distinctive cultural elements (language, national history, belief in common ancestry, culture, religion, territory, value system, religion and ethnicity) does not necessarily coincide with a patriotic resolve to defend one's nation-state. Also, a preference for economic motivation over the patriotic one was noticeable, whether in the decision to participate in military action or to abstain from it (and perhaps flee to safety). This attitude seems to be unchanged even after reading the comics which presented the patriotic struggles of Lithuanians in the glorious past, years 1918–1920, when the modern Lithuanian nation-state was established. On the contrary, the students even interpreted their history textbook as supporting the priority of economic motivation.

Majority of school students who participated in this focus group research do not seem to connect their empirical interests with the abstract interests of their body politic in the case of need for military action and elevate their personal physical safety or economic reward above the personal defence of their nation-state. Educational tools proved ineffective in the attempt to mould a different attitude.

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Tautinė tapatybė ir patriotinės nuostatos: Lietuvos moksleivių atvejis

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje aptariama gyventojų padėtis dabartinėje modernioje tautinėje valstybėje jų santykio su savo tauta ir valstybe požiūriu. Žmonės atsiduria tarp patriotinių ir ekonominių interesų, asmens teisių ir nacionalinių interesų, empirinių poreikių ir abstrakčių reikalavimų. Šias įtemptas situacijas, išsamiau aprašytas ankstesniame straipsnyje, iliustruoja Lietuvos moksleivių požiūrio teminių grupių tyrimas. Nustatyta, kad dauguma mokinių pirmenybę teikia ekonominei ir asmeninei motyvacijai, o ne patriotinei. Kaip būdas įgyvendinti patriotiškesnes nuostatas buvo išbandytas istorinis ugdymas, paremtas komiksais.

Raktažodžiai: modernioji tautinė tapatybė, nacionalizmas, patriotizmas, komiksai