

Freeing the Polyphony: Decolonising the Essentialised *Identity Politics* Towards Ethnic Minorities

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Coloniality in today's world is a matrix of worldviews, shaping the mechanisms governing not only the coloniser's but also the colonised mind, nevertheless, as well as ways of resisting it. In this article, we examine how coloniality, shaping the *identity politics* towards ethnic minorities, perpetuates relations of power and subordination through essentialism. As is widely acknowledged, essentialism can serve as an emancipatory and strategic tool for minority groups. However, as our research shows, it simultaneously often produces 'ethnostress' – a feeling of inadequacy to one's own identity and pressure to meet one's own group and coloniser's homogenising expectations. We examine mechanisms of de-essentialisation and de-homogenisation, that allow for the decolonisation of *identity politics*, seeking to answer the question of how the polyphonic and pluralistic voices of ethnic minority members can gain greater visibility and be more valued. In this article, we introduce and juxtapose two different ethnographic cases: the indigenous Sámi minority in Finland and the Polish national minority in Lithuania.

Keywords: (post)colonial studies, decoloniality, de-essentialisation, de-homogenisation, identity politics, Polish minority, Sámi people

FREEING THE POLYPHONY: DECOLONISING THE ESSENTIALISED *IDENTITY POLITICS* TOWARDS ETHNIC MINORITIES

Contemporary state policies that target ethnic minorities can be understood, following Hill and Wilson (2003), as a specific strand of identity-oriented governance: they prescribe and stabilise ethnic labels, delimit who belongs, and under what conditions. We approach these policies through the lens of decolonial thought, which shifts attention from colonialism as a historical regime of territorial domination to *coloniality* as its enduring epistemic and affective aftermath (Quijano 1992; 2007). Rather than a completed chapter of history, coloniality designates a set of long-lasting hierarchies that organise labour, knowledge and subjectivities, and that continue to shape everyday interactions and institutional practices (Maldonado-Torres

2007; see Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025: 38). Even where formal empires have vanished, these hierarchies persist in academic canons, state bureaucracies, and seemingly mundane assumptions about who counts as 'modern' or 'civilised'. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) therefore speak of coloniality as a matrix of power that both limits what can be imagined and channels how collective identities are authorised and policed.

In this article, we foreground coloniality as the main analytical entry point into *ethnostress*. Both nationalism and coloniality shape the dynamics of ethnostress. However, our analysis deliberately foregrounds coloniality as the primary interpretive framework. While ethnonationalist movements generate internal expectations of 'authenticity', coloniality helps to reveal the external structures of power and epistemic hierarchies that sustain these dynamics. By focusing on coloniality, we aim to extend the discussion beyond nation-state or kin-state nationalism and show how deeper colonial patterns continue to influence experiences of ethnostress even in contexts not commonly recognised as colonial. Essentialism is thus a profoundly ambivalent tool: it may temporarily empower marginalised communities, yet, as Spivak reminds us (Danius et al. 1993), when adopted unreflexively, it risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to contest.

As research shows, essentialism may have another negative consequence for minority members. It often produces *ethnostress* – a feeling of inadequacy regarding one's own identity and pressure to meet one's own group and also the coloniser's homogenising expectations. The article not only examines the expectations of authenticity and concept of ethnostress but also explores how the researched communities actively negotiate and overcome these pressures, which constitutes one of the key novelties of this paper. In the article, we examine the mechanisms of de-essentialisation and de-homogenisation, that allow for the decolonisation of identity politics. We seek to answer the question of how the polyphonic and pluralistic voices of ethnic minority members can gain greater visibility and be more valued.

We present and juxtapose two different ethnographic cases: the Indigenous Sámi minority in Finland and the Polish national minority in Lithuania. These cases differ in terms of the experience of colonisation – the Sámi are victims of settler colonisation, while Poles in Lithuania are part of the project of 'imaginary colonies' in the so-called Polish *Kresy*, e.g. territories to the east of today's Polish border, located among others in the area of today's Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus (see Sowa 2011). However, as our research shows, identity politics affecting both minorities are shaped by coloniality, which, according to Walter D. Mignolo (2017: 40), largely points to the ongoing epistemic power structures of colonial logic. Thereby, coloniality does not only happen in previously colonised places, or settler colonies, but also in world power structures internalised into our epistemic systems. It is worth noting, however, that these cases differ in terms of the colonizer's goal. In the case of settler colonialism, the coloniser seeks to eliminate people by assimilation, physical displacement, erasure of cultural practices, etc. (Veracini 2011). The goal of Indigenous peoples like Sámi resistance is therefore to stay a distinct group. In the case of Polish 'imagined colonies' in the *Kresy*, the goal is to create an imagined land inhabited by a community of descendants of the colonizer, testifying to a former power, a heroic history, and dominating vast territories, constituting a kind of reservoir of idealised national identity. This need creates an image of compatriots from the *Kresy* suspended in the historical past.

Decoloniality theory emphasises the plurality of epistemic systems by different peoples and suggests that by freeing themselves from the imposed Western episteme, they have to decolonise their minds. Hence, this might be understood as coming back to the 'original'

group's episteme (Hull 2022). This essentialises ethnic groups and draws them into 'getting back their authenticity'. This is particularly problematic, as this article tries to show, because it often creates the feeling of inadequacy in one's identity. Decoloniality allows us to understand and reveal how the matrix of colonial power touches people in various ways, including epistemologically. However, we see decoloniality not as returning to the pre-colonial past (a reverse move) but as an alternative future (a move forward) with damasked power relationships and pluriversal ways to exercise agency, autonomy, free choice, and identities, and understanding their complex historical backgrounds.

This article is based on two ethnographic fieldworks. Ugnė Barbora Starkutė conducted an ethnographic fieldwork in the Finnish Sápmi intermittently during 2016–2024. Research data consists of participant observations, live-story interviews, semi-structured interviews on 'ethnostress', media material, art (movies and literature), and complementary materials such as data on representations of Sámi people in Finnish high school books.

Anna Pilarczyk-Palaitis conducted the research in Lithuania intermittently during 2020–2023. This article is based on the long-term participant observation in Polish cultural centres and other public meeting places of the Polish minority in Vilnius and the Vilnius Region (Lithuania), as well as in-depth interviews with people of different ages who identify themselves as Polish and have lived in the region since birth. Additionally, the research includes an analysis of public discourse around the Polish minority in Lithuania.

ETHNOSTRESS – INTERNALISED EXPECTATIONS OF ESSENTIALISED IDENTITIES

The term *ethnostress* was introduced by Mohawk (First Nation in Canada) educator and healer D. Hill, along with her colleagues Antone and Myers (Hill et al. 1986), and later raised by other scholars: Antone and Hill (1992); Cajete (1994); Sanchez (2003); La Duke (2005); Merskin (2010); Wallace (2012); Pilon (2020); Sámi scholars Kuokkanen (1998), Valkonen (2009) and Lehtola (2015). According to Hill and Antone, among many tensions that people experience, they carry cultural trauma for multiple generations. *Ethnostress* also encompasses the issue of 'culture under glass', which is freezing Indigenous culture in history and expecting Indigenous people to match this image (Antone, Hill 1992). The term content has changed slightly in the Sámi scholarly context. In the Sámi scholarship, the concept of *ethnostress* has evolved from describing the psychological consequences of colonisation to encompassing the ongoing negotiations of identity, belonging and authenticity within both Sámi communities and majority society. It now highlights how pressures of identity expectations – both internal and external – shape contemporary experiences of Sáminess as a dynamic, reflexive, and often contested process. The term *ethnostress* was later adopted in Sámi media and became a widely discussed topic, particularly in youth circles. Over time, it entered everyday language as a vernacular expression used to articulate and legitimise feelings of 'not being properly Sámi', and to describe the power dynamics underlying such experiences. Even though the term mainly comes from the Indigenous context and is related to colonial trauma, loss of culture as a result of assimilation, and current expectations of authenticity by matching colonial images of indigeneity and cultural 'otherness', similar expectations can also be experienced by various minority groups. Both groups we discuss here experience *ethnostress* because of essentialised identities and homogenised images of peoples coming both from outside and inside communities. Let us examine both cases more thoroughly.

The Sámi people are indigenous to Europe and live in the very north of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. In the 15th century, interest in Sámi lands grew,

leading to settler colonisation that pushed the Sámi people north and brought settlers to work as agricultural labourers, loggers, miners and builders, eventually making the Sámi a minority in most areas. Strong assimilation policies were implemented in Sápmi during the 20th century. With the growth of the welfare state and the introduction of compulsory Finnish school education, cultural normalisation had a strong influence on Sámi culture. In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, children were punished for speaking Sámi, or yoiking (traditional Sámi singing). As a result of Finnisation, a generation of Sámi speakers was lost (it especially affected smaller Sámi languages such as Inari and Skolt Sámi). To be a Sámi person became something to hide and was often considered shameful. However, in the 1970s, the strong cultural revival and ethno-political movement of the Sámi people began in the Nordic countries, and a single Sámi nation-building process started. Together with cultural revival and ethno-political movement, Sámi languages have been revitalised. However, for many Sámi people, the Sámi language is the second language, and cultural practices have not been passed on. The lack of language skills and other attributes considered traditional, like handicrafts (for example, making traditional clothes on your own), traditional livelihoods such as reindeer herding, fishing, and in general, living from nature today, make people feel 'not proper' Sámi. However, ethnostress is not only a direct product of 'loss of culture' but expectations drawing from coloniality from outside and inside the community.

According to Sanna Valkonen (2009), the aspects of Sámi culture at which the assimilation policies and humiliation were directed became an emancipation source and symbols of united Sáminess in the cultural revival movement. These aspects, as mentioned above, are language, handicrafts (*duodji*), traditional livelihoods, and connection with nature. The image of a 'proper' Sámi is both a product of the ethno-political movement, where people needed common symbols to unite as a nation, and of the dominant society's expectations of what Indigenous Sámi people should be like. It is a direct product of colonialism since the group needs to perform 'cultural otherness' in the logic of settler colonialism. The strategic essentialism (Spivak 2008) produced during the nation-building process cannot be really stopped because of this need for 'otherness' in settler colonialism, even though it became damaging for the community once the political powers of the group had been mobilised.

Trying to fulfil the image leads to ethnostress. Journalist and reindeer herder Xia Torikka wrote:

Sámi youth also feel pressure from being Sámi in other ways. They think they should speak perfect Sámi, do Sámi handicrafts, yoik, take care of reindeer or be active in Sámi politics. Especially for Sámi youth living in the south, maintaining and finding their own identity is difficult (Yle 2015).

During the research in Finnish Sápmi, some Sámi research participants also shared their experience of not feeling 'proper' Sámi, for example:

I also many times notice myself thinking that I'm less in the way when I think about me being half Finnish and half Sámi, and sometimes I feel less, because I can't yoik [the traditional way of singing], or I don't have reindeer, or I can't make my own gákti [traditional clothes] (Interview 2018, alias Eliisa, aged about 24, see also Starkutė 2020, p. 71).

In analysing the Polish minority in Lithuania, we focus primarily on its entanglement with the Polish kin-state and on the forms of ethnostress that arise from this entanglement. A more comprehensive study would also have to examine, from a postcolonial perspective, how Lithuanian state-building has affected this group. Lithuania itself has a long and complex

history of being positioned as an object of imperial ambitions – from the partitions and Tsarist rule to Soviet domination, but also within the asymmetrical structures of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where, as many scholars emphasise, Lithuania did not function as an equal partnership but rather entailed its subordination and polonisation (see Sliesoriūnas 2021).

Drawing on Brubaker's work (2000), we treat the Polish minority in Lithuania as a paradigmatic example of what he calls an *accidental diaspora*: a minority that did not move, but was transformed into a diaspora by shifting frontiers (Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025: 142–143). Such groups tend to inhabit compact territories and are therefore easily construed by the new state as a potential security problem. At the same time, they often sustain affective and political ties with a kin-state that claims to speak in their name. In the Lithuanian case, nationalising narratives present the titular nation as the historically rightful subject of statehood, while minorities produced by border changes are interpellated as not quite fully belonging. This configuration significantly contributes to the specific forms of ethnostress discussed in this article.

Nevertheless, given the relatively substantial body of research on the relationship between the Polish minority in Lithuania and the Lithuanian state, and the pronounced lacuna concerning the relationship between that minority – understood as an 'accidental diaspora' – and the nation-building narratives of the Polish state, this article will focus primarily on the latter.

Although the Polish minority in Lithuania has attracted a considerable scholarly attention, most existing analyses concentrate on questions of regional belonging in the multi-ethnic south-eastern part of the country. Much less has been written about how this minority is positioned vis-à-vis the Polish state, which explicitly presents itself as their kin-state. In particular, there is still a shortage of empirical studies that explore how Warsaw's policies and symbolic investments – including the mobilisation of the *Kresy* trope and the mythologised figure of 'Poles from the East' – shape the everyday experiences and self-understandings of Polish-speaking communities in Lithuania.

A useful perspective for analysing the ethnostress experienced by the Polish minority in Lithuania is the *Kresy* discourse, shaped by the post-war redrawing of borders that resulted in the Polish People's Republic losing its eastern lands. For Poles living in Vilnius and the surrounding region, those changes were transformative and occurred with a striking abruptness: a population that in the interwar period had constituted the titular majority suddenly found itself reclassified as a national minority. The shift in state boundaries had another far-reaching effect as well – it contributed to the rise of a contemporary 'cult of the lost territories' in Poland and reinvigorated, with a remarkable intensity, the long-standing national myth of the *Kresy* (Bakula 2006: 13). Over time, this sentiment evolved into a public discourse that came to occupy an increasingly prominent position within the Polish national narrative.

It is worth underscoring that the *Kresy* discourse in Poland is supra-ideological: while right-leaning governments tend to amplify it more loudly and sharply, it has, to varying degrees, been present in the discourse of every administration since Poland regained independence. This persistence stems from its cultural reproduction – *Kresy* constitutes an inseparable component of Polish national discourse and underpins the national cultural canon and school curriculum for generations (Hadaczek 1999; see also Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025).

Although Poland never possessed overseas colonies, since the late 1990s scholars across a range of disciplines (e.g. Janion 2007; Sowa 2011; Zarycki 2016) have increasingly argued

that the *Kresy* should be understood as a form of Polish ‘imagined colony.’ In this perspective, the *Kresy* narrative operates as a mechanism of symbolic appropriation (Skórczewski 2012: 130). The spatial and cultural construct of the *Kresy* is no less essentialising, ahistorical, or mythic than Said’s notion of the ‘Orient’ (Said 1997); it resembles a ‘spectacle suspended in time and space, complete with its characters, storyline, and props’ (Środa 2020: 237). Within this framework, the Polish minority in Lithuania – positioned as inhabitants of the *Kresy* – is frequently homogenised into a singular, coherent group endowed with a set of fixed attributes.

From Poland, they do not see us as modern people. We are all supposed to walk in folk costumes, cut rye with a sickle, and live in a wooden cottage. And worship Piłsudski (Interview 2022, alias Tomasz, aged about 25).

The *Kresy* narrative functions as a mechanism for safeguarding an imagined vision of ‘romantic Polishness’, projected onto the region as if it were a relic of some undefined ‘olden times’ and upheld as a symbolic representation of the nation. In this framing, the *Kresy* become a kind of open-air museum exhibiting an idealised and supposedly ‘authentic’ Polish identity. It is important to note, however, that this is a deeply exclusionary model of Polishness. Young members of the Polish minority in Lithuania who travel to Poland for their studies frequently express surprise at not being recognised there as Poles. As my interviews with students educated in Poland indicate, the reception they experience in Poland differs markedly from the image presented in the official discourse:

For Poles from Poland [...] you can often hear, when they come, that we are ‘real’ Poles, that they can learn Polishness from us [...]. But when I came to Poznań, I suddenly became for them ‘Ruska’ [Russian], and when I said I was a Pole from Lithuania – they called me Lithuanian (Interview 2022, alias Monika, aged about 45; see also Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025, p. 206).

This example illustrates how sharply delineated and deeply felt group boundaries are among the study participants. While in public and official – particularly political – discourses in Poland, Poles from Lithuania are often portrayed as the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ Poles, their lived experiences in Poland tell a very different story. Upon arrival, they are frequently identified by Polish citizens as Russians, Lithuanians, or simply as people ‘from the East’ – in short, as anyone *other* than Polish.

Ethnostress is not limited to the moment of crossing a national border; it also emerges through internally enforced expectations about who qualifies as a ‘real’ Pole. In this understanding, ‘real Polishness’ is granted only to those who conform to particular normative criteria. Individuals who fall outside these boundaries often experience subtle forms of exclusion – or are actively marginalised – by a community that disciplines itself through these standards. As the existing research indicates, the idealised and homogenised figure of the ‘true *Kresy* Pole’, produced within the Polish institutional imagination, contributes to the rise of what MacCannell (2001) terms staged authenticity: a performance of identity crafted to meet presumed expectations of an external audience, in this case officials of Polish state institutions and representatives of NGOs that finance local initiatives. This dynamic is especially visible among those whose professional lives are closely tied to ‘Polishness’, such as employees of organisations and institutions dedicated to Polish culture and education in Lithuania – many of which rely heavily on funding from Poland. In Lithuania, several thousand individuals earn their livelihoods in this sector: journalists and staff of Polish-language media, members and coordinators of numerous Polish organisations, teachers and administrators in Polish educational institutions,

cultural centre employees, and leaders of Polish folklore ensembles, among others. For all of them, ethnicity functions as a source of employment, and for many – particularly those living outside the capital – it provides access to stable and attractive job opportunities.

We play, we play all the time – they [Poles from Poland] play that they love us and Vilnius, and we play what they want to see – patriots at Pilsudski's grave and children in folk costumes (Interview 2023, alias Agnieszka, aged about 40; see also Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025, p. 202).

Many of the interviewees point out that such 'commodification' of Polishness (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2011) leads to a further essentialised version of the *Kresy* Polishness being binding in public behaviours. This in turn results, first of all, in limiting the freedom of people who are afraid to publicly admit, for example, that they do not go to church (because a 'real Pole' is Catholic), or that their children go to a Lithuanian-language school (because 'real Poles' send their children only to Polish schools), for fear that they or their family members will suffer in some way because of it, for example, they will lose their jobs in an institution controlled by Polish organizations (see Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025: 204–206).

[...] one woman here was fired from her job at the post office [...] because she sent her child to a Lithuanian school. Poles [are] in the local government, [...] they must somehow defend this Polishness in Lithuania, [...] I don't know what she expected, unless perhaps that they wouldn't notice (Interview 2023, alias Donata, aged about 55; see also Pilarczyk-Palaitis, 2025, p. 200).

In many of the interviews, interlocutors describe Polishness not only as a marker of belonging, but also as a resource that can be converted into jobs, grants or symbolic capital. Cultural workers, teachers, activists and local leaders often build their careers around activities labelled as 'Polish' – from folklore ensembles to heritage projects. At the same time, these positions tend to be tied to a narrow repertoire of acceptable self-presentations, strongly informed by the *Kresy* imaginary.

This situation generates two interconnected forms of discipline. Externally, funding schemes and programmes associated with Polish state institutions reward performances that match a pre-selected, idealised vision of the minority. Internally, organisations and institutions within the minority itself monitor whether employees conform to these expectations and whether they project the 'right' kind of Polishness. This monitoring does not stop at public appearances; it spills over into judgements about ostensibly private matters, including choices of language at home or decisions about children's schooling (see Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025: 206–207).

FREEING THE POLYPHONY

Minority group members are not powerless and, although power relations are certainly not in their favour, they negotiate the imposed expectations and often simply resist them. In our research, we tried to explore how minority members adopt strategies of de-essentialisation and de-homogenisation of their identity and the images surrounding it. We believe that observing and learning from these small strategies coming from the bottom-up can provide broader answers about how identity politics can be de-essentialised and the polyphonic and pluralistic voices of members of ethnic minorities can gain greater visibility and be more valued.

All contemporary collective identifications are the result of continuous negotiations between existing social and state discourses on nationality and ethnicity and self-reflective

identifications of people based on both local roots and globalisation. In other words, they are the result of the impact of the 'top-down' identity politics and 'bottom-up' processes, in which individuals weigh or negotiate culture and identity, sometimes even against the will of the power structures (see Hill, Wilson 2003).

Members of the Polish minority in Lithuania do not simply internalise external expectations; they also develop ways of loosening or contesting them. One particularly visible strategy consists in privileging local and regional attachments over identification with an abstract, state-centred image of Polishness promoted from Warsaw. This shift can be seen in the increasing use of local Polish varieties in artistic production – in stand-up, popular music or literary experiments – where features previously stigmatised as 'incorrect' or 'provincial' are reclaimed as an element of building new individual identities and as a source of pride in possessing a distinctive local culture (Pilarczyk-Palaitis, Vyšniauskas 2024).

These practices mark a move away from treating standard Polish as the only legitimate reference point. Artists who explicitly position themselves as 'from here' also unsettle the trope of the Polish 'noble savage' in the *Kresy*. Their ability to do so is linked to access to alternative funding and professional networks, which makes them less dependent on Polish state institutions. As our interlocutors emphasised, having more diverse sources of support broadens the spectrum of publicly audible Polish voices and reduces the self-disciplining pressure to inhabit a single, state-sanctioned model of Polish identity (Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2025: 226–227).

We're not very good at applying to Lithuanian or European institutions to look for funding. Some people say it's not worth trying because Lithuanians won't fund Polish initiatives anyway, but I think the truth is somewhere in the middle: they're probably not eager to fund us, but Poles also don't really apply. And that's a pity, because it would give us some freedom. [...] New projects would appear, at a higher level, because right now it's a bit of a mutual-admiration club (Interview 2023, alias Agnieszka, aged about 40).

In the Sámi case, a variety of funding possibilities, greater availability for individual and community expression are beneficial in bringing the voices of minority groups and discussing the issues they face inside the group. Various ways of public debate and communication within the community exist in Finnish Sapmi – from arts, cinematography, books, or Sámi radio and TV *Yle Sapmi* (part of Finnish national broadcasting), as well as individual activist social media profiles. The radio program *Sohkaršohkka*, which makes short comedy sketches about Sámi youth life, including mocking the tourists who expect to meet an 'authentic ancient' Sámi, or other Sámi who discipline others, is an example of de-essentialising identities. Articles published by *Yle*, the Finnish National broadcasting company, have also addressed *ethnostress* (Honkanen 2014; Torikka 2015; Lähteenmäkki 2020). In addition to the media, such issues are tackled in artworks, e.g. literature (*Halle Helle* by Niillas Holmberg). This contributes to raising awareness, since the term (*ethnostress*) was introduced in the Sámi community to explain a variety of negative stressful feelings and expectations around Sámi identity. Such awareness raising is also achieved in Sámi language classes, where pupils and teachers talk and share various negative feelings they may have during the process of taking back the language. Not only legitimisation of the term and together with that the feeling, but also a broad public debate and visibility in itself is a critique of essentialisation.

Accepting diversity of identities and the fact that one cannot do everything to be a 'proper' Sámi or Pole is part of how people deal with *ethnostress*. Both studies show that public discussions about identity in different public media are extremely valuable in this process. Anthropology has learned that identities are multiple, hybrid and flexible a long time ago. It is no

coincidence that such knowledge is grounded in Indigenous experiences, which offers alternative frameworks for Western conceptions that often promote a mono-dimensional identity constructed through the lens of dominant, privileged societal norms and notions such as blood quantum. These rigid frameworks are not only limiting but also internalised, and unlearning them can be a crucial step in addressing ethnostress. Research participants have expressed their multiplicity of identities – being Sami and Finnish at the same time. Some emphasised that it was very important for them to realise that they do not need to choose one of the identities. A Sámi participant shared that seeing a Sámi artist expresses her dual identity as both Sámi and Finnish in a documentary brought her relief and helped her reconcile her own identity (Interview 2023). She emphasises the significance of representation: *‘it was definitely the question of representation that I realized this through. So it has played a major part in this realization because I saw this documentary’* (Interview 2023, Rovaniemi, alias Karoliinná, early 30s). Another participant tells about Instagram stories he started to make to change the narratives about the Sámi people. He illustrates various Sami characters that are recognisable for Sámi people, not always so clear for outsiders as they do not match ‘traditional’ often met representation of Sámi people. However, these representations are more relatable and real from contemporary everyday life. Polish youth in Lithuania are also increasingly publicly voicing the complexity of their identity, finding relief in ‘moving away from national monogamy’ (Kuncewicz 2025).

Public representations of minorities are crucial for the emergence (or silencing) of multiple voices. School curricula offer a telling illustration. As our research shows, both Finnish and Lithuanian textbooks lack sufficient information about the minorities discussed in this article. The Sámi people have expressed complaints about the lack of information about Sámi history beyond a stereotypical and brief information in school textbooks. Apart from brief mentions of other minorities living in Finland and rare mentions of contemporary Sámi activism in 35 Finnish geography, social science and history revised textbooks, there is not much information, let alone historical accounts of early history, colonisation, assimilation and nation building, that would help people better understand the current situation and ethnic stress.

A comparable pattern is visible in the Lithuanian–Polish case. In popular historiography and media in Poland, people from Vilnius and its environs are frequently folded into a broad and rather undifferentiated category of ‘Poles from the East’, which glosses over the specific historical and political trajectories of this group. Pupils attending Polish-language schools in Lithuania, for their part, study from Lithuanian textbooks that have been translated rather than substantively adapted. These materials centre the majority’s past and largely omit national and ethnic minorities (cf. Naudžiūnienė 2019). As a result, neither young Sámi nor young Poles in Lithuania encounter a fuller account of their communities’ histories within the formal education system, making them susceptible to internalising essentialised stereotypes about their people, which in turn reinforces experiences of ethnostress.

CONCLUSIONS

The empirical material is juxtaposed as two examples of diverse contexts that nevertheless show some similarities. In both cases, we are dealing with a sense of inadequacy towards the expected (or perceived as expected) image of the ‘real or proper’ Sámi in Finland or the Poles in Lithuania. The imposed expectations involve a kind of ‘authenticity’ frozen in time. The essentialisation of identity ceases to have the mobilising function of a group and acquires the power to discipline group members, imposing on them a certain vision that they must adhere to.

An important phenomenon occurs at the interface of what Jonathan D. Hill and Thomas M. Wilson (2003) distinguished as identity politics and the politics of identities, emphasising that these two are in a constant dialogue, although not necessarily possessing the same power. The first is a part of formal and structural politics practiced in the political arenas of governments, parties and corporations, cities, regions and states, while the second is bottom-up processes in which local people weigh or negotiate culture and identity and challenge the power structures and assets that constrain their social life (Hill, Wilson 2003). We should see the ethnic process not only as a dichotomy of a nation-state power and a marginalised ethnic group's voice, but as heterogeneous mutually influential systems. In this sense, identity politics most often means the requirement to conform to a unified version of top-down expectations, often under the guise of efforts to preserve the 'authenticity' of ethnic culture. As a result, the complex and diverse essence of ethnic identities is reduced to a homogeneous version of itself in the face of outside expectations. It is therefore extremely important to strengthen the politics of identity, that is, grassroots processes, to de-essentialise and at the same time decolonise it towards ethnic minorities. However, rather than assuming the existence of a unified or idealised 'grassroots' movement, this study focuses on individual experiences, reactions and responses that emerge in everyday contexts. These forms of expression are understood not as manifestations of a singular collective initiative but as dispersed, situated practices that adapt and reinterpret existing identity ideas and markers. While they are not entirely free from politics or hierarchy, they generate greater polyphony and responsiveness to homogenising pressures. As the findings suggest, such adaptive and plural forms of identity negotiation may help to alleviate, rather than reinforce, the ethnostress experienced by members of minority communities.

Such efforts and strategies to de-essentialise identities are visible in the communities of case studies. Examples in the case of the Sámi in Finland and Poles in Lithuania demonstrate the importance of providing a variety of funding sources and improving the availability and the ability to use other existing sources of financing. This would allow people to express and discuss their identities through multiple mediums, rather than relying on a single source that might impose essentialising expectations. Additionally, these cases highlight the significance of the representation of diversity within the Indigenous and ethnic groups as depicted in education and educational materials (but not limited to that) to be acknowledged.

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Polifonijos išlaisvinimas: esencijizuotos tapatybės politikos dekolonizavimas etninių mažumų atžvilgiu

Santrauka

Koloniškumas (*coloniality*) šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje yra pasaulėžiūrų matrica, formuojanti mechanizmus, kurie valdo ne tik kolonizatoriaus, bet ir kolonizuotojo mąstymą. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip koloniškumas, veikiantis etninių mažumų tapatybės politiką, palaiko galios ir pavaldumo santykius per esencijizmą, ir kokie būdai atsiranda tam pasipriešinti. Nors esencijizmas gali būti išlaisvinanti ir strategiškai naudinga priemonė mažumoms, vis dėlto, kaip rodo mūsų tyrimas, jis tuo pat metu dažnai sukelia vadinamąjį „etnostresą“ – nepakankamumo savo tapatybei jausmą ir spaudimą atitikti tiek savo grupės, tiek homogenizuojančius kolonizatoriaus lūkesčius. Straipsnyje nagrinėjami deesencijalizacijos ir dehomonizacijos mechanizmai, leidžiantys dekolonizuoti tapatybės politiką ir siekiant atsakyti į klausimą, kaip pliuralistiniai etninių mažumų balsai gali tapti labiau matomi ir vertinami. Straipsnyje pristatomi ir priešpriešinami du skirtingi etnografiniai atvejai: autochtonų (*indigenous*) samių mažuma Suomijoje ir lenkų tautinė mažuma Lietuvoje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: (post)kolonijinės studijos, dekoloniškumas, deesencijalizacija, dehomonizacija, tapatybės politika, lenkų mažuma, samiai