

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Leonid Georgievich Volkov sat in his sparse Astrakhan office and smiled at his guest. Volkov was bemused. As Head of the city government's Department of Youth Affairs, he had never talked to an American about these issues before. How was he to explain the dilemma he faced, in a way that would make sense to this inquiring professor? "Everything has changed," he began. The professor, who said he specialized in the former USSR, presumably already knew this, but still it seemed like an appropriate way to start. "Everything," Volkov repeated, "has completely and utterly changed."

"Now, not only are the economy and society not protected, but neither is the culture." Instead, he explained, the floodgates had opened, and everything – especially the popular culture and the milieu of young people – was suddenly awash in a maelstrom of foreign ideas. "Yes, there has been a huge influence of the West," Volkov commented sadly, shaking his head several times. "An *unfortunate* influence."

And it was easy to understand how this had occurred. "It has taken place through artificial ties, especially films." Hollywood films: violent, sensationalist, tawdry films catering to the lowest common denominator of vulgarity. "This influence affects attitudes and behavior," Volkov went on, "and produces what we can call a 'cult of individualism' instead of any feeling of being part of the collective, of society." It was all so much more complicated, and Volkov wanted the professor to understand this point: there were no simple solutions.

"Individualism is *good* in some ways," he added. This needed to be made clear; after all, Volkov was not some moldy, unreformed Soviet apparatchik. "There *should* be some individualism. Self-sufficiency is a positive thing. Of course, young people need to take care of themselves, and they should contribute to Russia's development." In these ways, he argued, Astrakhan offered wonderful opportunities for young people. "We have oil here," he gestured out the window to the south. "This is the Caspian Sea. We have drilling. We have the market right here."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 National identity and globalization

In short, there was nothing wrong with individualism, *per se*. But if everyone was only out for themselves, how would they be able to speak a shared language and come to shared understandings? This was not a black-or-white issue, but rather one of degree. “*Too much* individualism is bad for traditions, it is bad for common understandings, and for the ability to make decisions,” Volkov stated solemnly. “And therefore, we must try to choose.”

“It is necessary to start in the schools,” he proclaimed. “In school, children learn about their culture. They learn their traditions, they learn their own way of life. They already know their own values, and now they learn about them in more depth. Spiritualism. Charity. An Orthodox identity.”

“Children are proud, good, self-aware,” he continued. Yes, this was the point he had been looking for, and now Volkov warmed to the theme. “Young people know, they *absolutely* know. They *want* Russian culture. They know about the West. Even we knew about the West, the Beatles.” Volkov shrugged. So what? “But in the end they naturally want Russian ideas, Russian culture.”

But just as naturally, as is always the case with children, it was necessary to provide supervision. And this was Volkov’s responsibility. “We have a plan,” he informed the professor. “We coordinate with the center; we have our programs here; we meet; the departments work together. And it is not us alone. Everyone, teachers, volunteers, parents are involved. These are all our children. This is our country.”

The subject of this book is the connection between state–society relations and national identity formation in post-Soviet Eurasia. “State–society relations” refers here to the entire field of interactions between centralized political institutions and decentralized associations of citizens, to the extent that such interactions arise in regard to shared concerns about collective identity. As such, this book is about the challenges facing people like Volkov, and how they respond to these challenges – independently as well as collaboratively – in the context of globalization.

I begin with the now commonplace observation that identity is a social construction. Indeed, this observation has become so widely accepted as to scarcely occasion notice – especially (but not only) among the legions of constructivist scholars which have sprung up in the past twenty years. And yet this seems to be one of the many situations in which what goes unnoticed also obscures questions which ought to be asked. That is, while abundant scholarship has demonstrated that identity is indeed constructed, remarkably little attention has been paid to the three dimensional *sociality* of identity construction, including the agency involved in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

conceptualizing, negotiating, and communicating national identity in the context of cultural globalization. How do states and societies respond to foreign cultural flows, and why? Thus, my objective is to understand not simply the *effects* of globalization, but also the *social process* involved in mediating it, and the connections between such processes and specific national identity outcomes. What kinds of actors are involved in constructing national identity; what organizational settings are they located in; what mechanisms do they employ; and within what sorts of interpersonal networks are they embedded? The result is a set of unique, theoretically important insights about the linkage between national identity construction and social-political responses to globalization, which carry far beyond the post-Soviet field.

In problematizing the process of national identity construction, I have chosen to focus on the sub-theme of youth. There are several reasons for making this analytical choice. The first is quite simple: narrowing the scope of inquiry to the youth helps make the sprawling discursive field of national identity formation a bit more manageable. In addition, however, youth identity is a useful proxy for national identity more broadly, inasmuch as it is a particularly sensitive area of collective identity formation. In part this is so because young people are especially attentive to and absorptive of global cultural trends, which helps us understand how the perennial need to re-establish legitimacy is complicated by cultural globalization. As Jean and John Comaroff observe, “youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, uncharted borderlands along which the global meets the local.”¹ Daunting under any conditions, the inherent difficulties of inter-generational identity transmission become still more problematic amidst the maelstrom of global flows, which call into question established institutions and norms, and thus create sensual temptations among impressionable young people. This raises the other way in which examining youth identity is especially revealing: the contours of youth identity have widely regarded to have enormous implications for national identity as a whole. Perceived changes – or even possible changes – in youth attitudes and behavior therefore generate a tremendous amount of popular anxiety about the prospects for social cohesion, which then becomes the subject of extensive and often contentious public discourse. For these reasons, youth culture is a prominent subject of state policymaking as well as grassroots organization. In short, the official formulation and public enactment of youth identity represents a key modality through which society goes about reproducing itself.

¹ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” *Public Culture*, 12, No. 2 (Spring 2000): 291–343, at p. 308.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 National identity and globalization

This calls for an important qualification: the analytical focus of this book is to explain the *process* of identity construction, not so much its *outcome* – which, as will be discussed in the following chapter, is not particularly unique in any event. The emphasis is thus on the strategic and prescriptive construction of youth identity, as constituting a crucial component of national identity formation under globalization. As we will see below, this has to do with idealized identity constructs and narratives, especially as they are supplied in the course of controlled (or ostensibly controlled) activities deemed healthy and proper for young people. Examples include art exhibits, film forums, reading circles, sporting competitions, and other activities intended for the younger generation at large. The central argument being made here is that attending to such questions yields a set of critical insights into state–society relations, including the way in which state–society relations are worked out through the construction of national identity.

Moreover, to avoid any subsequent misunderstandings, I wish to stress that my proximate analytical goal is *not youth identities in themselves* – i.e., the values, attitudes, outlooks, and characteristic behavior of youth. Not only has this question already been well studied by others,² but it fails to engage the particular problem I wish to address, which has to do with the organization of youth socialization and what this reveals about society at large. To be sure, it is impossible to explore these questions fully without considering how the youth themselves respond to the socialization process. Young people are not simply passive recipients, but are actively involved both in engaging – and often contesting – globalization and nation-building. For this reason I consider the views of young people regarding these matters, and I also observe their direct involvement in a number of activities aimed at socializing them. Nevertheless, the actions and attitudes of youth are distinctly secondary themes here. Instead, the main subject under consideration is *the social construction of youth identity, by adults, for the consumption of young people*. I argue that attending to this issue is particularly helpful for coming to grips with a number of key questions related to state–society relations, including the links between state building and nation building under conditions of globalization.

² Among the important studies to have examined post-Soviet (especially Russian) youth are Hilary Pilkington, ed., *Looking West: Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Culture* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002); Fran Markowitz, *Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Russia* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Ken Roberts et al., eds., *Surviving Post-communism: Young People in the Former Soviet Union* (Edward Elgar, 2000); James Finckenaue, *Russian Youth: Law, Deviance and the Pursuit of Freedom* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995); and Hilary Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and its Culture: A Nation's Constructors and Constructed* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I have chosen to explore these interconnections by looking at three key post-Soviet states: Russia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. The former Soviet states are a wonderful laboratory for studying globalization and national identity because since 1992 they have been rapidly inundated by foreign cultural flows, while also having to tackle state building and nation building. With substantially different patterns of political institutionalization and degrees of democratization, they also offer a comparative dimension. However, globalization is largely an urban phenomenon; contestation of and resistance to globalization at the grassroots level takes place mainly in urban centers.³ For these reasons, I combine my analysis of state-level policymaking regarding national identity with extensive fieldwork in three cities: Astrakhan (Russia); Almaty (Kazakhstan); and Baku (Azerbaijan). Each of these globalizing cities – as regional and/or national centers – provides especially fertile ground for exploring public responses to cultural globalization. Studying them also offers a way of grounding and contextualizing developments which are taking place at the national level in the three countries, and indeed in most countries experiencing globalization. In short, by exploring how globalization and identity formation are mediated by various actors at the national as well as local levels, we are able to grasp what is ultimately at stake for society as a whole with regard to collective identity, social solidarity, and the very nature of the state.

To quickly dispense with definitional issues, for our purposes globalization may be understood in terms of flows: of capital, people, goods, information, and ideas. Moreover, rather than simply referring to the aggregation of such flows, globalization implies an acceleration and intensification of their volume as well as a heightened degree of penetration across nation-state borders. Rather than being merely a structural condition, however, globalization is also a dynamic, intrusive presence, producing constant disruptions in the field of meanings and practices available to actors. One consequence is what has come to be called “deterritorialization,” or a loosening of the relationship between culture and place, which in turn complicates the ability of nation-states to conduct their crucial business of nation- and state-building.⁴ And yet, collective identity formation is an integral part of the nation and state building business which the post-Soviet states are immersed in, and this highlights the puzzle addressed here: what will be the outcome of this struggle? In short, rather

³ Albert Paolini, *Navigating Modernity: Postcolonialism, Identity, And International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999), pp. 9–17.

⁴ A critical discussion of this term is John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 106–49.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 National identity and globalization

than viewing globalization as an assumed pattern of outcomes, whether homogenization or fragmentation, we are better served by approaching it as an open-ended process. This helps avoid the pitfall of premature closure, or of presuming to understand the ultimate effects of a process which is still very much fluid and fundamentally contested.

As a prelude to examining globalization's effects on identity formation we may begin by considering one of the many insights of Arjun Appadurai, perhaps the most influential writer on cultural globalization today. For Appadurai, the massive flows of ideas across national borders tend to produce supranational attachments, while at the same time diminishing cultural stability.⁵ Participation in this process, along with anxiety about its possible effects, sparks a discourse of engagement with globalization which Appadurai calls "imagination as a social practice."⁶ Indeed, the focus of this book is the social practice of imagining national identity in the context of globalization. In addition to the content of ideas carried by globalization, the very notion of globalization itself is a part of what gets imagined. As Giddens has argued, this is because globalization is characterized not only by the scope and speed of interconnectedness but also by a "reflexive" self-awareness of being involved in this process.⁷ One of the most powerful forms social imagining takes, therefore, has to do with the future of polities which are self-consciously encountering massive international flows, including the questions of whether, or how, they can survive as autonomous entities.

As a result, while neither the particular types of flows nor the social processes associated with national identity formation are fundamentally new, the growing connections between them have, in fact, created something qualitatively new and different with respect to national identity formation. That is, the construction of national identity has been significantly altered by the ever more ubiquitous interference of external forces, and the subsequent need to respond to them systematically through institutional means. This raises the problem of mediation, or how societies attempt to manage the flows of globalization – again, often in quite self-conscious ways.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the same deficiencies evident in the literature on globalization are present in the literature on national identity formation. Thus, while the past two decades have seen an outpouring of

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 10–34.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

interest in cultural globalization, relatively little work has been devoted to examining how cultural flows produce their effects, including the part played by individual actors in regulating or contesting such flows and their consequences for social identity. To the extent that scholars have considered the problem of mediation at all, they have focused on elites inside and (to a lesser extent) outside of the state.⁸ Far less attention has been paid to the role played by non-elite actors in interpreting and adjudicating the influence of foreign ideas. The scholarship to date has also generally emphasized individuals or self-contained groups (i.e., of elites or state officials), rather than examining the relationships between actors embedded in overlapping organizational networks.⁹ What tends to be discounted, as a result, is the crucial fact that the “connectivity” engendered by globalization encompasses not only the economic, ecological, and technological spheres, but also has a social and institutional dimension.

As should be obvious to the reader by now, I wish to approach the problem of globalization in a quite different way. Empirically, I find an ongoing campaign intended to mediate the effects of cultural globalization, which is joined by state actors at the central and local levels, as well as by activists within various extra-state forms of social organization. Moreover, I find that horizontal and vertical links between all of these actors are common. I argue that by highlighting this social dimension and exploring the linkage between cultural globalization and national identity construction, we gain important insights into the changing nature of state–society relations more broadly. In particular, I would suggest, by focusing on sociality we are able to grasp a fundamental complementarity between state–society relations and modes of collective identity construction, as these become manifest in response to cultural globalization.

State–society relations and national identity formation are mutually intertwined processes; they affect one another in ongoing ways. First, state–society relations influence the process of identity construction by determining the range of actors available to take part in it, the density of interactions across the formal state–society divide, and the prospects for politically consequential cooperation arising from such interactions. Yet the reverse is also true: the very formation of national identity, as a social

⁸ Examples are Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997); also David Chaney, *Cultural Change and Everyday Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

⁹ An important exception is Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 National identity and globalization

process, not only emerges through state–society relations but also shapes and reshapes these relations. Such processes are always inflected by culture. In the case studies explored here, the dynamic linkage between national identity formation and state–society relations is influenced by two sets of cultural factors: 1) endogenous cultural legacies arising from the Soviet experience, and 2) exogenous cultural flows introduced by globalization, including prevailing ideological interpretations of globalization. This overarching cultural context constrains the processes of identity formation and state–society relations by making certain modalities of organization more likely than others. In these particular cases, therefore, as we will see in detail, the pattern of social response “selected for” by globalization and preexisting cultural legacies is decentralized and flexible, incorporating local grassroots initiatives alongside state policymaking.

Still, the institutional and cultural conditions under which such processes emerge are only part of the story. To understand how identity construction unfolds we also need to come to terms with the actors involved, and the choices they make regarding particular identity constructs and patterns of collaborative action. There is, in other words, no automaticity to the influence of structural factors. Moreover, in engaging the process of identity construction, actors potentially become invested with real agency – as they work out specific constellations of meanings, devise prescriptive patterns for youth socialization, and establish newly appropriate patterns of state–society interaction. While a lesser focus of this study, it should also be noted that youth themselves are obviously implicated in this process through their contestation of the relevant venues and values. In short, by examining identity construction in thick social context, and seeing how actors strategically engaged in it navigate structural conditions as well as how they negotiate particular local outcomes, we gain a nuanced understanding of the agency involved.

In exploring these patterns of social response bound up with the construction of national identity, we encounter a series of ongoing dialogues or social discourses about three main groups of ideas transmitted by globalization. The first group, which carries a distinctly Western pedigree, consists of neoliberal understandings about the desirability of market institutions and of instrumentally rational, efficiency-seeking behavior. The second group, which again emanates largely from the West, comprises various attitudes, values, and lifestyles associated with global pop culture. And yet, as Stuart Hall’s conception of “mass popular culture” reminds us, these ideas and attitudes are fostered by the West, but are absorbed and “operate through” local cultural differences, rather than

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

eradicating them.¹⁰ The third group consists of notions of nationalism and state sovereignty, ideas which, over the past two centuries, have become thoroughly global in provenance. These involve assertions of legal and institutional prerogatives as well as imaginings of national solidarity and collective purpose, many of which have their roots in the Soviet period or even earlier, but which are now being rediscovered and/or “reinvented” and pressed into the service of nation-building and state-building schemes.

Of course other ideas circulate within globalization as well. These include various transnational movements, ranging from radical Islamist to anarchist, which express resistance to established institutions and identities. They also include Orthodox, Buddhist, and other spiritual doctrines. Yet the actual influence exerted by these ideas and movements – at least in these countries in general and these cities in particular – remains relatively marginal. While they are of concern to state and society at large, they do not feature prominently in the social discourse of national identity construction and youth socialization. Instead, themes associated with neoliberal individualism, Western pop culture, and nation-state imaginings tend to prevail.

Not surprisingly, these interconnected discourses bound up with marketization, popular culture, and national identity are extensively reflected in state policymaking and diffuse social action. What we discover is that, in each of these cities and countries as a whole, states and social actors have used central ministries as well as decentralized institutions, in order to fight a rearguard cultural battle. This battle is intended not to eradicate Western influence, but rather to limit certain “dangerous excesses” while channeling its perceived beneficial aspects in order to promote certain identity goals and policy purposes. State and non-state elements of society thus respond through a discourse of invented and resurrected traditions, designed to create a historicized image of the ideal citizen as obedient and industrious. This discourse consists of several components. First is an overwhelming preoccupation with Western influences and their identity implications, which are extensively contested. Second, such contestation is repeatedly marked by two fundamental objectives: sanitizing or detoxifying the most virulent strains of globalization in ways consistent with the larger nation-building and state-building project, and coopting its benign or productive features for the same purpose. Third, this

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in Anthony King, ed., *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), pp. 19–39, at p. 28.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87619-3 - National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society
in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 National identity and globalization

preoccupation with the global is mirrored by an obsession with the national, which takes the form of asserting an ostensibly unique, indigenous, and traditional identity, which it is incumbent upon all well-socialized youth to embrace. Along the way, entrepreneurs actively engage in the process of crafting narratives and attempting to mold young people's minds, while also trying to reconcile the contradictions which arise between these "hybrid," or mixed, identity constructs.

This bid is never entirely successful. Instead, in what emerges as a key hallmark of globalization, one finds abundant evidence of contradiction and ambivalence, and slippage between what is sought and attained. This is hardly surprising, since – although the entrepreneurs we encounter would be loath to admit it – the notion of fixity in national identity formation is a deeply illusory one. However, it is still fairly early in the post-Soviet transition, and who knows? Perhaps the outcomes of this effort will be successful, as young people incorporate and reproduce the core of these broadly prescribed national identity constructs. For our purposes, however, the ultimate *outcomes* of youth socialization are far less important than the *process* involved in mediating cultural globalization and national identity formation, as engaged in by state and non-state actors alike.

The remainder of this book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 provides a comparative frame of reference for thinking about the topic of this book, by offering a broad overview of cultural globalization and national identity formation. In addition to sketching out the primary features of "hybridity," I underline the profound similarities in how globalization is responded to in the former USSR and elsewhere in the world. This includes absorption, or a bid to acquire the ideological underpinnings of Western life, such as individual rationality and initiative. At the same time it includes rejection, or the attempt to avoid "excessive" forms of individualism, such as selfishness and sensual indulgence. Finally, it also typically includes assertion, or a plea for retraditionalization, which not only promotes a sense of pride in national aesthetics but also serves as a hedge against harmful foreign influences.

Proceeding from these observations, chapter 2 outlines an interpretive epistemology for explaining identity formation under globalization, by inquiring into the meanings of, and reasons for, specific identity narratives. I offer some tentative reflections on how the typical pattern of national identity response might be explained from various theoretical vantage points, as well as the indeterminacy of such approaches. I argue that it is useful to examine the process empirically, from a discursive and interpretive standpoint, in order to understand the arguments and reasons associated with hybridization in particular settings. I also suggest