2. National Identity as a Process

2.1 Introduction

The reorganisation of political space along national lines after World War I and II shed new light on the concepts of nation and state. Particularly in Eastern Europe—after centuries of multiethnic Commonwealth and blurred national boundaries—the question arose about how to consolidate the principle of the congruency between nation and state. Then, during the repression of the anti-nationalist communist regime, national identities were forbidden to be represented or even to be articulated. Ethnic minorities, which found themselves within the borders of a neighbouring nation dwelled in the environment of a foreign dominant language and culture. The break-up of the Soviet Union was therefore welcomed as a chance for national liberation and articulation within a civic state providing minority rights.

Yet the claims being stated on behalf of national identity and national politics are, first of all, not homogenous in their nature and groupness and secondly, they are not constant in their intensity. The heterogeneity of national narratives and demands can often be traced back to regional differences or to intergenerational divergences. The fluctuating strength, salience and centrality of national feeling, identity or politics allude to the so often neglected fact that there is a lack of congruence between an ethno-national political sphere and everyday life. Nationalist utterances of politicians and organisations are not responded to in a likewise manner. Indisputably, there have been moments of high mobilization where the perception and articulation of national identity proved its operative ability. But afterwards a decline followed and the contextual and situational shift in identification has become clear. Emanating from these assumptions, the task is not to figure out whether national identities are constructed over time, but how national selves are construed and expressed in variation over time. What maintains national identity? Under which conditions does one feel closer to a collective national grouping?

Elaborating on the dynamics of identity formation, first of all, the term “national identity” has to be defined. It is not sufficient to describe identity just as being negotiated and constructed within political and historical contexts because there are a lot of other intricacies that need to be considered in order to provide a reasonable and comprehensible analytical framework. An adjunctive theoretical pivot in this
regard is the ontology of groupness itself. Within the discussion of nationalism and ethnicity, the question of group boundaries arises – in particular, of the maintenance of these boundaries and the strengthening of group identities.

2.2 Pillars of Identity Theory

The dynamics of national identity formation can be evaluated from various points of view. Before dealing with the process of construction and maintenance, we should get an idea where the sociological interest regarding national identity comes from. By studying various approaches to identity, one can understand the multifaceted aspects of identification and belonging.

The first serious discussions and analyses of national identity emerged during the 1960s with Erik Erickson’s studies on the individual sense of self and the integration into a group. His interest in identity formation was stirred by the historical events against the background of World War II and its effects on personalities. Within this historical context a vogue of national-character studies evolved to which Erikson was affiliated (Gleason 1983:924). In his psychodynamic approach he links the (psychological) personal identity to “communal culture” and views adolescence as a particularly important phase for the development of identity (Erikson 1950). Other psychological orientations emphasized the personal construction and reconstruction of the self by interpreting the behaviour of oneself and others (Kelly 1955; Bannister/ Fransella 1971) or the cognitive-affective consistency, which stresses the effects of prior experience and the resulting relationship between attitude and behaviour (Rosenberg/Abelson 1960; Festinger 1957). But Erikson was the first who conceived personality as affected by one’s social heritage and group environment. Furthermore, in his popular work *Childhood and Society* (1950) he introduced the expression “American identity” instead of the hitherto used equivalent “American character” (see Gleason 1983:926).

The linkage between role theory and identity as presented by Erikson was extended with the reference-group theory by Nelson N. Foote (1951) who related the term identification to the way in which a person’s sense of identity and attitudes were shaped by his identification with a reference group (see also Allport 1954). He defined identification as a matter of “appropriation of and commitment to a particular identity” (Foote 1951:17), thus as a conscious choice and an active take-over of social roles.

Similarly, the sociological school of symbolic interactionism addressed the way in which social interaction, embedded in symbolic systems, influences the self-consciousness of a person. Concerned with “the self” – instead of using the term “identity” – Erving Goffman (1959) especially underlined the social context and its influence on the role-playing of the individual. The association of the self as a given