

Mobilisation and Community Formation in Minority and Diaspora Contexts: The “We” in Central and Eastern Europe

*Institute for Cultural Analysis of the Germans of Eastern Europe (IKDE)
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The “We” is a commitment. Attributions and appropriations of belonging play a central role in the creation of community – they serve as markers of (self-)assurance, facilitating internal identification but also external demarcation. This community-building effect has an inherent explosiveness: it is capable of emphasizing what ‘we’ have in common (Scheer 2022), but this demonstrative attitude also harbours populist potential. Initially broad and vague in conceptual terms, we therefore pay particular attention to communities, when they are called upon: war and crises, but also the need to find orientation after migration and to plan for the future to negotiate belonging(s). As a result, new formations of collective images and mechanisms are constantly emerging, challenging existing concepts.

For instance, with regard to Eastern Europe, the term ‘We’ took on a charged meaning in contrast to ‘They’: Not only is the multi-ethnic region imagined as inferior (Todorova 1997), but its citizens also experience racialised degradations throughout history and due to their (labour) mobility, which highlights inequalities between East and West (Lewicki 2023) and clearly calls into question a European ‘We’-consciousness.

In the context of the region, but especially among Germans in Eastern Europe, various forms of thinking about and doing community can be found in the transnational sphere between ‘homeland’ and place of residence: Hometown magazines (Heimatzeitschriften, Kasten/Fendl 2017) and other performative acts such as commemorative or festive days (Schell/Prosser-Schell/Pusztai 2018), both in the region of origin and now in Germany, form arenas for negotiation. Moreover, references to a shared heritage are playing an increasingly important role in economic contexts: while communities from Transylvania have often made considerable financial and organisational efforts to renovate e.g. fortified churches, this heritage is increasingly being promoted for tourism purposes (Oltean/Anghel/Schuster 2017). It cannot be ruled out that other regions may follow suit and launch similar grassroots initiatives. Yet, the question of renewing the sense of community also arises when the generation who experienced flight and expulsion passes away. This challenge is comparable for those in diaspora communities who still knew their homeland from their own experience. New narratives and updates to the association's work are desirable here.

These examples highlight, that, overall, the “We” as a building block of identity has repeatedly been the subject of debate, particularly when it comes to (forced) migration, border shifts and the experience of foreignness: The developments of the “short twentieth century”, the “Age of Extremes” (Hobsbawm 1994), made it clear that ‘we’ – up until the present – are not in a post-community era of solitary seclusion. Rather, „post- is always shadowed by neo-“ (Clifford 1994, p. 328), so that existing and seemingly fading images of community are constantly revised and updated. These transformations are themselves subject to a certain timeliness, thus offering insight into historical and current conjunctures and trends. In this respect, manifestations of (new),

and probably only partial social cohesion can serve as a lens through which to view society and its units. In the context of cultural studies research on these “we”-images in migration, minorities, and diaspora, the focus shifts from mere attributions to the underlying, often implicit schemata, routines, and resources (Brubaker 2002) that enable community formation and further connection. They require an examination of their inherent historical contexts and cultural mechanisms, their narratives and performative modes of expression. The conference will therefore focus on the following, interlinked questions and topics, but is not limited to them:

“We” as a political project

How have political programs and movements shaped the politicization of (ethnic) communities and their identities? To what extent have they negotiated the issue of loyalty, especially with regard to potentially conflicting, overlapping loyalties? How are these contexts reflected today; how are they remembered, but also discussed in the present?

The Mediatized “We”

How have media products – from historical newspaper prints and posters to today's digital platforms – addressed public consciousness and opinion? To what extent have they contributed to connection and exchange and addressed (new) opportunities for community building?

The Transnational “We”

Particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of flight, expulsion and exile: Which strategies did/do people employ to settle in a new place, in a new social environment? How did/do they in turn (re)establish connections to their region of origin? To what extent does this interaction create potential for intermediate, hybrid positions?

Commodifying and Renewing the “We”

How do collective actors – such as tourism, associations, town twinning, etc. – participate in the marketing of a certain “we”? Which aspects of detraditionalisation, but also which attempts to revive or even remake folk culture and involve new groups of stakeholders can be traced in their activities?

In addition, intersecting aspects such as generation, gender, and others shall be taken into further consideration. However, there should still be room for subjective interpretations and thus actor-specific negotiations. Hitzler et al. (2009), for example, refer here to the diversity of “post-traditional communities” and their situated, lifestyle-related community building. The conference therefore aims to reflectively explore community formation and mechanisms of social cohesion, their challenges and potential for the establishment of belonging. It provides a discursive space for evaluating “we”-formations and their potential for past, present and future variations of

belonging in minority and diaspora contexts in different local, regional, national, and transnational frames. In doing so, it will bring into focus that membership – whether in groups, associations, parties, neo-tribes, or communities – is often a pluralistic concept of attribution and appropriation that is subject to fundamental external as well as potentially polyphonic internal dynamics. These need to be analytically grasped and further accompanied by research, particularly in the wake of the “return of community in late modernity” (Rosa et al. 2010, p. 58).

Thus, historical and archival perspectives will be considered alongside contemporary research from a cultural studies perspective and other related fields. These approaches include case studies from the context of Germans in Eastern Europe, but the format is also open to comparative perspectives that go beyond this scope or relates it to other minorities, as well as perspectives from broader minority and diaspora research. Please send your proposal for a 20-minute presentation, consisting of an abstract (~2,000 characters) with a working title and brief biographical information about yourself, to Jana Stöxen (jana.stoexen@ikde.bwl.de) by 1st March 2026.

Travel expenses can be covered within the scope of the funds provided.

Literature

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