Why has nationalism not run its course?

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The war-torn twentieth century finished with the end of communism in Europe. National solidarity energised and drove these political changes toward a new and more dignified social order where personal and collective aspirations of people and their homelands would be finally fulfilled. Nationalism which accompanied these transitions turned out to escape its democratising intentions. The post-socialist transitions to democracy became overwhelmed by the newly asserted and mobilised ethnicity which demanded to address historical, territorial and political claims on behalf of the nation. In the turmoil of collapsing states, discredited ideologies, redundant political identities, repositioned borders and new successor states (and consequently new minorities), all three multi-national socialist federations Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia disintegrated the last amidst a brutal war and shocking violence.

In 2015, there is a war in Europe and on its edges. The current conflicts whether in Ukraine or the Middle East are identity-related civil wars of huge humanitarian and political dilemmas with far-reaching consequences for international order. Nationalism seems to have returned to Europe. It scapegoats foreigners and immigrants and right-wing nationalist parties, such as the Golden Dawn in Greece, thrive across the whole continent. Whether this is a result of miss-managed geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East, global financial crisis or European integration, the nationalism we are observing in both western and what used be called eastern Europe demonstrates that the response to political uncertainties and threats – real or perceived – is accompanied by the rise of nationalism. This variety of ‘national’ response makes claims to protect the identity of the nation, to maintain (or obtain) more autonomy for it and safeguard its unity (Smith 1991: 73). In that sense, today’s version of nationalism is not very different in its definition to nationalism of the past.

The object of all nationalism’s endeavour is the nation. The concept of the nation is open to interpretation, depending on ‘the extent to which the criteria for membership in the national collectivity are correlated with ethnicity’ (Harris 2009: 50). It is either civic, that is, open and voluntaristic and equates with citizenship, or ethnic. The ethnic interpretation is exclusivist; it does not equate the nation with citizenship and has inherent tendencies toward exclusion of non-co-ethnics. The civic/ethnic dichotomy endorses and is endorsed
by its intellectual twin, the civic and ethnic nationalism that follows the same reasoning whereby civic stands for conducive to democracy, while ethnic is at best backward and at worst dangerous. This dichotomy may have its uses for distinguishing different conceptions of nationhood, but in the last few years, it has been challenged (Harris 2012:339-40; Kuzio 2002; Shulman 2002) for its simplicity in reflecting the evolution of different societies and the political reality of nation-states’ politics. The limitation of the civic/ethnic distinction is further exposed by the national self-determination doctrine which holds that ‘any self-differentiating people, simply because it is a people, have the right and should it so desire to rule itself’ (Connor 1972: 331). The controversy of nationalism – whether ethnic or civic - lies in the tension between its universal claim to the empowerment of people (citizenship and equality before the law), the particularity of the self-determining nation and the evident fact that the nation-state is hardly ever a state for and of one ethnic group but usually comprises one titular ethno-national group which assumes dominance in the distribution of cultural values and political power. Hence, all nationalisms are civic and ethnic to a lesser or greater degree at different times.

It is nearly a hundred years since the end of the First World War and the foundation of the then ‘new’ international order in which independence, nationality and self-determination for peoples of the fallen Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, but also the Balkan states, Belgium, Italy and Poland featured most prominently. Today, we are not much further than hundred years ago in answering the fundamental question on which our international and domestic political systems rest: whose territory, whose state, who has the right to govern it and who has the priority to receive state resources?

Why has nationalism not run its course? Our roundtable attempted to provide some answers in the three excellent papers by Geoffrey Hosking, Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Stein Tonnesson. There are some important observations deriving from their contributions. The first observation is that regional variation makes an attempt at a general theory of nationalism nearly impossible today, if it ever was possible to capture national developments in Europe, Africa, and Asia in a single meaningful theory. The second observation which goes some way toward answering the question why nationalism has not run its course is that while humanity remains divided into vertical nation-states, based on some putative reference to ethnic homogeneity equipped with citizenship and the protection by the state, the ethnicity-driven competition for power and control of resources is an integral part of (geo) politics everywhere. The third and more positive observation is that nationalism in the twenty-first century is increasingly mitigated by the multitude of international treaties and agreements about the protection of minorities and responsibilities of states through which the international community seeks to curb nationalism’s inherent tendency toward exclusion and conflict.

There is a contradiction at the heart of the promotion of more cosmopolitan virtues. The nation-state may be enmeshed in a complex network of international organisations and institutions, but at this stage in history, the nation-
state remains to be perceived as the main protector of cultural, economic and physical security of people and the main framework for the distribution of material and cultural resources. At the same time, the contemporary nation-state is increasingly less able to meet these challenges.

The consequence is that the answer to the question why nationalism has not run its course remains elusive and made more complex by a number of factors. While not particularly new, these factors significantly increase exclusivist and illiberal varieties of nationalism in contemporary societies. I shall here highlight a few of these factors:

- European integration has thus far failed to transcend nationalism; in fact, it appears to have – inadvertently, despite its nationalism transcending ethos – reinvigorated nationalism through the ‘backdoor’. This ‘backdoor nationalism’ (Fox and Vermeersch 2010) manifests itself on two levels. First, it is in pursuit of old ambitions to ‘unify the nation’ across the new relatively borderless European space through robust kin-state policies (of which more below). Second, it seeks to stifle the political opposition by differentiating themselves as the champions of its nation by implying that rivals did not have the national interest at heart. For example, Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister since 2010, has for many years been making references to ‘national unification of the Hungarian nation without modification of borders’ in the new borderless Europe of communities rather than territorially defined states. He successfully used European integration and the promotion of minority protection within the EU for promoting the ethnic Hungarian nation in neighboring countries with increasingly nationalist rhetoric (Batory 2010: 41; Fox and Vermeersch 2010: 330-31).

- Democracy is a global ideology, but in the world of blurred ideologies, there are many hybrid democracies (Diamond 2002). Some of these hybrid democracies are, in fact, limited democracies at best and semi-authoritarian regimes at worst. For example, they confuse the ‘will of the people’ with the will of a particular people and exploit this will mostly for their own political gain (as the current conflict in Ukraine amply demonstrates).

- In the world of many conflicts, there are many well-intended peace treaties and many hastily constructed constitutions which may end violence, but in the long-term, they turn out to reify ethnic divisions rather than unify people (for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Iraq).

- The international community has re-defined sovereignty by increased humanitarian interventions to protect people displaced by civil wars and assist people whose human rights are violated within their own countries. Despite the consolidation of human rights discourse and global threats, the response to threats remains national, because, first, there is no alternative on offer in a system of national states and, second, international law deals with states rather than with people for whose protection it purportedly exists. The current refugee crisis in Europe is an example of this tension.
between international human rights discourse, the international community and the states’ ability to override both.

- Ethnicity has entered international relations in a form of kin states and ever more animated diasporas. Kin states, also known as ‘external national homelands’ assert states’ right – even their obligation – to monitor condition, promote the welfare, support activities and institutions, assert rights and protect the interests of ‘their’ ethnic kin in other, usually neighbouring states (Brubaker 1996: 4). We are observing ethnic identity as an integral part of political and constitutional processes which concern citizens of another state. Kin-state legislation which involves various forms of citizenship rights (partial, electoral, social and cultural benefits, full, access to labour market, etc.) defies the well-established concepts of the nation, national territory and national citizenship, because it is blurring the boundaries of who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ (Harris 2012: 348).

For example, the Fundamental Law of Hungary (2011, Article D) declares that there is one single Hungarian nation that belongs together and that Hungary ‘shall bear responsibility for the fate of Hungarians living beyond its borders’. Such decoupling of the ethnic and political (civic) nation in the form of kin-state legislation concerning citizens of another state is not particular to Hungary. In Croatia, the politicisation of ethnicity during Tuđman’s presidency made Croatia a champion of diaspora whose role assumed political character. The 1991 Citizenship Law offered citizenship to all ethnic Croats from near and far abroad while excluding others, mostly Serbs who lived in Croatia all their lives (Koska 2012); at the height of Tuđman’s presidency, the diaspora with no permanent residence in Croatia (mostly residing in Bosnia–Herzegovina) had twelve out of 151 seats in the Croatian Parliament. Since 2010, when Croatia began its accession negotiations with the EU, the number of seats reserved for diaspora has been reduced to three. Slovenia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine have also included links to their ethnic kin abroad in their constitutions. A more revealing aspect of the implications of kin-state legislation and the right of states to protect their co-ethnics is the case of ethnic Russians in Crimea, many of whom carried Russian passports when Russia annexed Crimea (2014).

The importance of ethnic kin in the politics of states varies by regions and political circumstances. While it is clear that international constraints matter (Seideman and Eyres 2008: 237), there is evidence that the efforts to unite ethnic kin across boundaries continue to destabilise many border regions. On the other hand, there is some evidence that having strong cultural and diplomatic links between ethnic kin and kin state may mitigate secessionist tendencies of ethnic kin (e.g. Republic of Ireland has played a supportive role in promoting peace in Northern Ireland, Austria and Italy’s role in South Tyrol). Nagle (2013) using data from 1989–2011 demonstrates that few kin groups engage in violent struggles to alter the territorial integrity of the state they reside in. His analysis however suggests that the crucial factor in moderating interstate and intrastate relations
relating to ethnic kin remains a careful consultation between kin and host states about bilateral ties and citizenship rights awarded to ethnic kin (Nagle 2013: 303).

Either way, the increased role of diasporic minorities keeps nationalism alive in the political life of many states – on both sides of the border. While interethnic relations are primarily managed by states, ethnicity which transcends state boundaries is likely to continue to assert itself where the nation-state has failed to reconcile territorial, political and historical grievances in need of resolution.

The contemporary nation-state with all its arsenal of triumphs – national identity, sovereign statehood and democracy – is changing toward something as yet unknown. Nevertheless, nationalism continues to serve as an identifier of people’s place in the world and a political strategy for defining the relationship between the nation and the state within our world of the significantly changed nation-state. This is because this nineteenth century idea of political organisation has erected a whole set of political and cultural references whose meaning is so deeply entrenched in citizens’ political consciousness that the absence of an effective alternative creates a near existential anxiety (Harris 2011: 98). It is this anxiety which may also provide a partial answer to the question why nationalism has not run its course.

References


Harris, E. 2012. ‘What is new about “eastern nationalism” and what are the implications for studies of ethnicity today?’, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 18, 3: 337–57.


