

Nationalism, Xenophobia, Populism and Nation States in the Modern History of Central Europe

This short introductory essay (related to the topic of the CESR–WSCF conference in Senec) examines the historical background of the different faces of nationalism and xenophobia related to the modern Central European nations and their countries.

Homogenising Nations in Multinational Europe

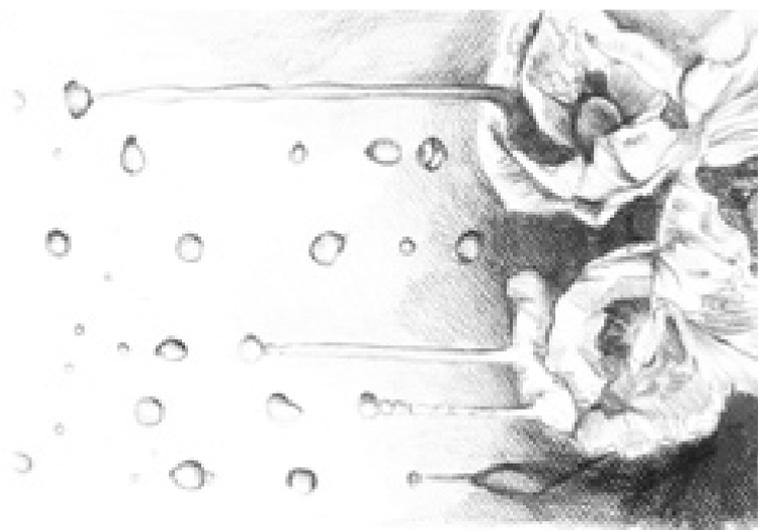
The development of the pre-nations—ethnic groups—was quite different in our region of Central Europe compared to the processes in Western Europe in the Modern Age. In France, from the eighteenth century on, a civil, unified and homogenized nation was formed through a long historical process.

The main tool of this social change was both the forced and natural assimilation of different national groups into the dominant French nation, with its language and culture, before modern nationalism was born in the nineteenth century.

Self-identities of the national groups were not strong enough to resist against this homogenous pressure. From the nineteenth century on, the French model became a solid base for the creation of nation-states based on the theory of the self-sovereignty of each European nation.

To implement this political practice in the traditionally multinational and multilingual environment of Central Europe was practically impossible without giving rise to conflicts and discrimination.

Within the borders of the large traditional aristocratic empires, a parallel development of different languages and cultures took place, all developing within the same geographical framework.



In this way, by segmenting the Slovak-populated areas from the Czech and Polish territories, the borders of the Hungarian Kingdom enabled the development of the Slovak language and cultural identity.

The nobility of the then kingdoms and empires had the same legal status regardless of their mother tongue and self-identity. Traditional nations were the nations of nobles and aristocrats within a certain geographical territory: like the Polish *szlachta* or the *nemesség* of the Hungarian Kingdom.

Roots of Modern Nationalism

The problems of the Modern Age linked to nationalism had their deep roots in national motivations appearing in the early nineteenth century. Nationalism as such proved to have a double face.

On one hand, it created a democratization of cultural values, producing a new kind of identity based not on social position, but on language and culture. Thus everyone was able to become an equal democratic member of a modern nation, instead of the traditional nobility-based nation model.

On the other hand, these national identity-building motivations strictly opposed other nation-building motivations, and in many instances attempts were made to assimilate minorities of different cultural backgrounds. To reach this aim, nation-state governments

and administrative bodies often used populist political measures based on national myths or xenophobia.

Nation-states led to successful national integration and social democratization; the majority of society was able to experience a new and significantly higher level of social life. Due to the lack of the rule of law, however, these results appeared to be favourable only for the prosperity of the dominant (titular) nation (or nationality) within the nation-state.

At the same time, minorities were harshly discriminated against in almost every field of social life: education, job market, public administration, public life, and so on. Safeguarding their dominant national identity and sovereignty, the nation-states successfully opposed the liberalization of borders. Also, they opposed decentralization within the country, resisting the establishment of strong cross-border regional social, infrastructural and economic connections.

Ideology of this kind of political establishment typically contains populist and xenophobic elements either in a direct or an indirect way. It can be claimed that it is one of the main general socio-historical and economic problems of the present Central Europe too.

When trying to identify the roots of the mentioned problems, it can be observed that in the nineteenth century some nations were in a dominant and preferred position. They were the biggest in the region and exerted the most significant influence, creating a natural basis for a number of conflicts.

Populism and xenophobia appeared to be useful tools in this process, when dealing with different questions; questions such as “who possesses the right over a territory, and who is entitled to create a unified nation-state on the basis of one culture, one language, and one religion?”

Tools of nationalism and xenophobia facilitated finding solutions, for example, by eliminating and assimilating those who are in a minority position according to the French centralized nation model. That was a major motivation of the nations of the region.

There were always, however, many compromises also. After the democratic revolutions, freedom fights and national clashes in 1848, some politicians realized that the dominating aspirations of a nation created opposition within other nations and could possibly provoke interference from an external dominant empire.

A federation with equal national positions appeared to be the most viable solution. But these ideas were only realized mainly after some unsuccessful domination efforts, as occurred with KOSSUTH Lajos'

Danube Confederation idea after the fall of the 1848 liberation war.

There was absolutely no chance that these great ideas would be taken seriously and into political practice. Later JÁSZI Oszkár and Milan HODŽA also remained alone with their federative ideas.

We should say, on the other hand, that after the unsuccessful imperial centralisation and suppression period in the Austrian Habsburg lands, it could be more successful to integrate the different national groups, such as the Poles in Galicia, and the Czechs in the Czech and Moravian territories, than the strong supremacy-based nationalist Magyar political elite.

That was a major reason for the elimination of the Hungarian Kingdom after the First World War. We are talking again about social life: the school system, the language usage rights and the structure of the public administration.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Slovaks completely lost their educational system and cultural institutional system because of the Magyar political decisions, and there were no opportunities for them to take an equal part in the public administration.

At the same time, in the Austrian lands, the balance in this field among the Czechs and Germans was almost total. The failure to turn from dualism to trialism, however, was a major problem for them, and it was also a major reason why the dominant Czech intellectuals wanted national sovereignty at the end of the First World War.

As for Polish people, the Austrian-ruled Polish territories enjoyed the best conditions in the former Polish Kingdom area for strengthening their culture and identity.

Mixed Identities of Central Europe

The historical remembrances of the nations of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy differ greatly from each other; containing a number of nationalist and xenophobic social and historical myths in every case.

But we should see, on the other hand, that there were several mixed identities also within families, for example within the ZRÍNYI-ZRINSKI and BALASSA-BALÁŠA families in the early modern period.

In the Austrian and Austro-Hungarian Monarchy period, everybody was nominally a member of the same political and social community, so it is useless to talk about the particular national identities of historical persons before the nineteenth century through the prism of different national myths.

In fact, this is a part of the tradition of national populism present in

all Central European countries. How one defined oneself individually by one's identity, how one wrote one's name, another should accept. The famous poet and soldier ZRÍNYI Miklós also used his Croatian name-form, Nikola ZRINSKI, because of his mixed identity.

Populists and nationalist often think in terms of simple intellectual schemes and forget that national identity is a dynamic social phenomenon, whose trends can change several times even within a relatively short historical period, within ten to twenty years.

For example, the re-establishing of the Slovak identity occurred just after the Magyar assimilation pressure was eliminated. We can talk about nations and national identities just in a certain historical period and context. These are not absolute categories, as the national populists suggest.

Tragedy of Fragmentation and Totalitarianism

After the First World War, the Western superpowers divided the nations in Central Europe in order to reach their own strategic goals and sometimes even imported ideological elements, which strengthened nationalism and xenophobia.

A region of less multicultural but nationally divided nation-states dominated by a nation with the problems of large minorities could be easily dominated by external powers, making a new power balance in the region, but just for around twenty years.

But of course then the real tragedies of the region were the great totalitarian empires to the East and to the West, Adolf HITLER's German Third Reich, and Joseph Vissarionovich STALIN's Soviet Union. They easily manipulated and undermined this fragmented state-structure with their own goals, easily eliminating also the Versailles system.

The new states after Versailles were as ethnically mixed as the previous empires after the First World War. The domination efforts by nationalisation undermined any kind of efforts for a solid democratic political establishment (as was the case in Czechoslovakia), or made no opportunity for democracy (as was the case in Hungary, because of the social and economic collapse).

Similar things happened in Poland, with the need to defend the Polish social positions against Germans, Jews, Ukrainians and Belarusians. Austria faced a special self-identity problem connected to the issue of defining itself in the new international environment.

Using national problems, Adolf HITLER could successfully undermine the whole Versailles system and the Third Reich became the only

major power in the region from the late thirties till the end of the Second World War.

The Western powers assisted Nazi Germany in eliminating the international political structure constructed by them. They were not able to defend either Czechoslovakia, or Poland, or Austria. The irredentist Magyar regime was the easiest target of the Nazi leaders' political manipulations.

These nations still have a kind of historical shock and trauma by the period of 1920–1948, because the creation process and some temporary collapse of the nationalized nation states, and as a result of severe manipulation by several external powers.

Totalitarian Heritage

The common geographical, social, political and economic frameworks were tragically divided and everyone became some kind of loser in the process. The formerly dominant nations were suppressed within a very short historical period (eg. Magyars after the First World War, Czechs and Poles after Adolf HITLER's aggression).

Relations with Adolf HITLER or Joseph Vissarionovich STALIN did not bring any long-term benefit to any of the countries. There was a kind of a collective revenge against the Germans and the Magyars after the Second World War; they were considered collective war criminals as allies of the Nazi regime.

The biggest forced migration since the fall of the Roman Empire in Europe happened just after the Second World War, in order to create clear totalitarian nation states without significant national minority groups.

The re-establishment of Central European nation-states after the Second World War took place again in a clearly antidemocratic and totalitarian way, using nationalist and xenophobic social feelings as political tools.

The national idea, however, as a new political myth became stronger in the twentieth century. It generated a kind of a myth creation process within the national states focusing on triumph and using national memory.

After the Second World War, Central Europe experienced a rise of Communist systems, in which proletarian internationalism was just an empty slogan. Any kind of pluralism could be dangerous for the authoritarian rule, so the nations formed the so-called Socialist nation-states with minimal mutual cooperation, mainly organized by

the Soviet Union. The borders were strictly guarded by the military also within the Communist bloc.

The decades after the Second World War strengthened the authoritarian and nationalist political, social and cultural behaviours in daily life everywhere, although nationalism as a political idea was a taboo in this period. Practically strong intolerant xenophobic nationalism and the totalitarian Communist rule were in alliance in the region.

The rule of Klement GOTTWALD and Gustav HUSÁK in ĀSSK are good examples, as well as the Rudolf SLÁNSKY case, anti-Semitic campaigns in Poland by General Mieczysław MOCZAR, and so on.

It would seem that Edvard BENEŠ and other non-Communist civil politicians did not properly realize that the collectivization of war crimes (instead of the individual trials) and total minority expulsion efforts were just the first steps of the Communist way towards the total homogenisation of society.

Shortly after the ethnic minorities were expelled, the leading non-Communist politicians found themselves in the same position: they became enemies of the state. The situation in Hungary was unfortunately no different. Most of the civil politicians advocated the expulsion of the German minority and were not able to realize the dynamics of the contemporary power struggles.

The Socialist policy towards national groups tried to eliminate the force of the political and cultural identities of these groups, forwarding their activities into politically neutral zones, like the so called musician and dancing folklore minority conception in Hungary during the era of KÁDÁR János.

This process caused significantly unequal and weak social and economic positions for these groups within the society, and highly catalysed individual assimilation into the dominant nations everywhere in the region.

Necessary Cooperation

Now we have to see that decentralized cooperation with other nations for our mutual benefit is essential. We have to rebuild the economic, infrastructural and social connections near the borders.

More and more people face the tragic weight of the losses or total elimination of their neighbours, like the Jews in the Shoa, and the tragic psychological and economical consequences of these events. We have to re-evaluate our views on our national myths and the changing phenomena of national identity within the European Union (EU).

Decentralizing the political and public administration structure of the Central European countries, and making a new kind of citizen-based democratic state paradigm can be quite essential tools for living together without any national fears from the parts of the dominant nations and minorities.

In the Nordic countries there are strong national identities, but national loyalty in itself is not aimed against the neighbouring nations. Simultaneously, the highly decentralized political and public administration system based on subsidiarity provides the chance for anyone in a minority position (not just ethnical) to feel at home without any major threat of discrimination.

For this very reason, the national identity of the majority people in the country does not suffer in the regions where they are in a minority position (see for example Finnish-Swedish model in this field).

As shown, it is possible to make a good regional framework for living together without the elimination and suppression of national feelings of culture and identity. It should be a good model for Central Europe also. The key points are democratization and decentralization.

Autonomous regions with strong democratic control and decentralized states without any dominant nationalisation aspirations, based on nationally and culturally equal and autonomous democratic citizens, may gradually eliminate national and xenophobic fears because of the equally individual and collective positions of the people.

When everyone is an equal citizen of a regionalized democratic state, applying subsidiarity, no one wants to talk about borders; it does not make any sense. We are, however, currently very far from these paradigms.

Each of the Central European states would like to be integrated into the European Union (EU) as a nationalized nation-state, trying to face the minority issues as a democratic problem of their mainly centralized political systems.

For example, the status of the socially disintegrated Roma community is a general problem in each of the countries in the region. Perhaps the relevant minorities in a small region within a state will also want to dominate through regional power in the same way as the general majorities do on the bigger, national level.

This might potentially lead to quite strong conflicts in the whole Central European region, and that is why we need a new state paradigm. The autonomy of political minorities also means a kind of national dominance against the assimilation pressure by the whole-country majority.

Are we able to overcome these strong tendencies by using our historical experience: the negative points of the nationalised nation-states, and any kind of national domination efforts creating a completely new kind of socio-political framework?

Questions for the Future

A seminar like the one held by the WSCF CESR in Senec is a very good opportunity to talk about the feelings and memories of the participants from different countries pertaining to these topics.

How can we build up dialogue with each other again? How can we accept the historical, psychological traumas and feelings of the members of other nations? How can we forgive each other and make viable compromises for living together in the future?

Is it really possible to overcome the traditional nationalised nation-state paradigm with an authoritarian dominative centralization-based social heritage? Can our countries experience a shift from national populism towards a new democratic, citizen-based, decentralized paradigm?

Or are we destined to remain in a continuous social battle between the dominative national aspirations of majorities and minorities? These are undoubtedly relevant questions for the development of Central Europe in the near future.

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