

# *Nationalism and Nation-Building as a Problem of Stable and Peaceful Relations in Europe*

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As you will remember, nation-building was a buzzword of the 2000s. When states threatened to collapse, as in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Libya, it was not enough to set up institutions and equip them with coercive powers. Experience showed that so-called state-building could only be sustainable if it enjoyed the support of a stable community. This, in turn—such was the theory—could only be the case if the minimum requirements of what is called a nation were met. Only the existence of a nation, a community of people who felt connected to each other over a long time and despite all political differences, could guarantee stability to a state.

The first requirement for a nation was that after an election, the losing party would not withdraw from state institutions, but be prepared to try again in four or five years. The second requirement was that inside the national community, the winners had to compensate the losers—or at least acknowledge a basic obligation to do so. Only then would it be accepted that neutral state institutions supervise and enforce the rules of interaction.

The concept of nation-building has often been criticized. One objection is that the idea of neutral state institutions following abstract rules is not as self-evident as it seems to Western observers. In some parts of the world, balancing between identity groups promised more stability than the existence of a state authority, which, by a majority of the population, would automatically be perceived as partisan, but which would at the same time have considerable power at its disposal. What if people do not see a judge, a prime minister, a senior police officer as the representative of an abstract idea, but as the Sunni, the Pashtun, the man from Benghazi?

At least in Europe, it seemed, this was not an issue. Wasn't Europe exactly the

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cradle of stable nations? The 1990s did bring state collapse in a European country: Yugoslavia. However, it was an untypical one. In no time at all, new states had formed from the bankruptcy assets of this state, and these new-born states seemed more like the classic European model than the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia had been: Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, and finally Serbia and Montenegro.

This was not the case in two products of the collapse of Yugoslavia: Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo had been theaters of war, and the population groups that had waged war against each other understandably found it difficult to form a common state across the fronts. Accordingly, the guarantor powers of the armistice, the US and the large European states, used the full range of nation-building instruments.

I would like to put forth that this concept was flawed from the start and why the failure is based on a fundamental misunderstanding.

The basic idea was: Only the existence of a national community spirit guarantees that a state remains stable. Europe is rich in examples of this: The French nation remained stable over five republics, two empires, and one kingdom. The German nation outlasted two thorough defeats in wars and four decades of division into two states.

Obviously, the German example highlights the downside of such a community spirit: Inward inclusion equals outward exclusion. National community spirit thrives best where an outside enemy appears, or at least is imagined. Depending on how the nation defines itself, the national community spirit, i.e. nationalism, can also be directed against minorities within. Germany, with the annihilation of the Jewish population and the hostility against other nations, is the saddest example of this mechanism.

Nation-building, as we have known it as a political strategy since the 1990s, is of course not aimed at developing an exclusive nationalistic ideology. On the contrary: nationalism was known to be the scourge of the 20th century in Europe, and the areas in Europe which are supposed to be the subject of nation-building were precisely its last victims. Rather, the objective was that national sentiment should reach just enough for the people within a state to feel that they belong to one another, so that they agree on the validity of common rules and laws and help each other when a part of the population threatens to slide into disaster.

When do people feel they are a nation? Modern historians and political scientists define nations as “imagined communities”—because the people who identify with the nation are unlikely to ever meet one another in life. But how do we feel we are a community? From everyday life, we all know two strong types of connectedness: one is neighborhood, the other is kinship. With our neighbours, we

share common experience, we share rules of conduct. With our relatives, we share common descent. It is these two types of connectedness, inflated to the dimensions of a national society, that hold communities together, real ones as well as imagined ones. Depending on how we feel connected to each other, our nation takes on a different character. In Europe, this character is an essential, often ignored, difference between West and East.

When Western Europeans began to feel like members of a nation, they had belonged to the same society long before, managing common affairs, or rather, letting their princes manage them. Accordingly, national sentiment was and is inextricably linked to the state: to the set of rules and the authority that organize the society.

This was not the case for Eastern Europeans. When modern nations were developing all over Europe, that is, mostly in the long 19th century, Eastern Europeans lived in large, supranational empires. The basis of their burgeoning sense of national community was not a state, not even a fixed territory. Their nations developed in the wombs of diverse, a-national, today we would say supranational empires, and accordingly became some sort of parties, parts of a political whole, bound together in the first place not by political authorities or common rules, but by a language or a denomination and a cultural identity. So the feeling of connectedness did not extend to the whole population of the state, but was defined as partial.

The formation of nation in Eastern European states began in the early 1800s, continued throughout the whole century, and became a universal European principle after the First World War. It did not follow the Western European example but developed a pattern of its own. To become a Czech, a Romanian, a Pole, did not mean you lived in a certain body politic or only strove to achieve national unity. When national states were formed in this part of the continent, they did not retroactively change the character of the spirit that held the nations together.

As a result, state and nationality remained incongruent. To this day, nationality and citizenship are two different things throughout the region. German or French tourists are surprised when they see the registration form in a Hungarian hotel that asks them to fill out both the “nationality” and “citizenship” sections. Aren’t these just two words for the same item? In Eastern Europe, though, everyone knows the difference and takes it for granted.

Everywhere in Eastern Europe, the “nationality” is surveyed in censuses, sometimes openly, sometimes covertly, when the questionnaire asks for your vernacular. In the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia, the principle was taken to extremes: every ten years, everyone declared themselves to belong to a certain ethnic group. The result served to distribute posts and resources fairly among the ethnic groups.

Western Europeans think of their nation as an extended neighborhood, while Eastern Europeans think of it as an extended kinship. The difference has important consequences. Co-nationals in the Western sense function according to agreed

rules that everyone has to abide by. In a neighborhood, an extended one as well as one in the literal sense, it is the institutions that form the community. Institutions are there to settle disputes and reconcile conflicting interests between institutions such as the police, a court, a regulatory agency. They are the ones that form the nation in the western sense. Just as all actual neighbors must separate their waste and not play loud music after ten o'clock in the evening, so the “neighbors” in the broader, national sense, in another word—the citizens—, must abide by the constitution. Without written rules, the people of a western country are not a nation, just a collection of individuals. There is no being French without France. Eastern Europeans, however, find it difficult to understand that French-speaking Belgians or Swiss are not French. In Western Europe, it is the institutions that form the nation. Here, this principle applies even to separatists: when the Scots and Catalans call themselves a nation, they refer to their state-like institutions and their parliaments, not to national characteristics.

A family, on the other hand, whether real or abstract, “national,” does not need a framework of rules in order to understand itself as a family. Of course, most families also know rules, sometimes even very strict ones. But it is not the rules that make the family. Seldom does anyone write these rules down, nor are they formally agreed upon. You grow into them, inherit them, take them for granted. In the end, it is not institutions that decide in a family, but natural authority figures, for example the father or the mother. Yet, neither the rules nor the authority define who belongs to the family and who doesn't. It is crucial that a family is a family, even if it does not obey any rules and does not recognize any authority figures. All these principles apply to families as well as to nations in the Eastern European sense.

The images of “family” and “neighborhood” do not yet describe differences in political reality or even in everyday life in the two parts of the continent. Of course, all Eastern European countries know just as many rules and institutions as Western European ones, and especially in the European Union, many of them are exactly the same. Eastern European neighborhoods in the literal sense, such as cities, work well everywhere, often better than in western countries: the rubbish is collected, buses run on time, and car traffic flows smoothly. In Eastern Europe, the family nation and the neighboring state, although clearly two different things, can happily coexist. The state exists, and it works. Only, unlike in the west of the continent, it is not borne by a single nation.

The distinction may seem abstract to you. But it has very practical implications. I'm thinking of Germany, which was divided into two countries for more than 45 years. Before the division, the family understanding of the nation, thus the Eastern European one, prevailed in Germany. After the division, national feelings developed in an interesting, a paradoxical way. In the West, the unity of the German nation was officially maintained throughout the entire period of division. In the East, on the other hand, the existence of a special socialist German nation was invoked from the 1970s onwards. Interestingly, both political concepts failed. In the East, which was governed by dictatorial rule, the population did not accept the new understanding offered by the communist party. After reunification in 1990, it turned out that the old, kinship understanding of what was German had remained unchanged—with all sorts of nasty consequences, such as hostility

towards immigrants. But in the West, contrary to the political intentions of the parties, a new, neighborly understanding of living together had developed, fostered by the retrospect to the shameful recent history and based on new experiences, experiences that did not include the East—the so-called economic miracle during reconstruction after the Second World War, the Western orientation, especially the alliance with the USA, all supported by popular brands, the automotive industry, by the myth of efficiency and by the stable currency, the German Mark.

What does this all mean for the idea of nation-building? The concept is based on the western understanding of the nation: citizens of a state should develop a common identity that is tied to the state. The concept can be seen most clearly in the two classic experimental fields of nation-building in Europe, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The two million inhabitants of Kosovo mainly identify themselves with two nations in the Eastern sense: the vast majority are Albanian, while a minority of today only around five percent are Serbian. The demand from the international community that a Kosovan nation should be formed and tied to the state and that the particular identities of Albanians and Serbs should be relegated to second place is rejected by Albanians and Serbs alike. Undaunted, Albanians and Serbs alike display their national flags. There is also a Kosovan flag, designed on the occasion of independence in 2008 and imposed by the western guarantor powers. But this flag is only displayed by authorities, and only reluctantly.

This practice is a telling example for the specific national identity. If Kosovo's independence was enthusiastically welcomed by the Albanian population, it was not because a new state was created, but because the founding of the Kosovan state meant liberation from Serbia, which had been conceived as a national state of Serbs. In contrast, the wish for the unification of Kosovo with Albania, i.e. for the creation of an Albanian national state, remained weak. Similarly in Bosnia: almost half of the population consider themselves Serbs or Croats, without fundamentally questioning their adherence to Bosnia. What most Serbs and Croats reject, however, is belonging to a Bosnian nation, as symbolized by an also newly invented flag. Civil wars were fought in both countries in the 1990s. Contrary to what is often claimed, the agent of these conflicts was not the striving for a national state of one's own people, but the fear of ending up as a minority in a foreign national state.

Anyone who sees the nation as a kind of extended family is by no means saying that neighborhoods are not important to them. Justice, fairness, democracy and the rule of law are valued by vast majorities all over Eastern Europe. These values just don't connect with the understanding of the nation. In Western Europe, the Eastern European version of nationalism is often reviled as 'ethnonationalism' or even 'tribalism'. The Eastern, ethnic understanding of the nation relates just as little to origin and descent as does the Western understanding of citizenship alone.

Unlike western nations, it is said, ethnic ones are not inclusive, do not accept new members—which often serves as an explanation for the European controversies over immigration and the integration of refugees. That's correct. But where the nation is not the bearer of the state, this national exclusivity does not have to impair tolerance towards people of other nationalities. Let me give

you a telling example: The people of Romania, ethnic Romanians making up for almost 90 percent, have twice in a row elected a man who sees himself as an ethnic German and who even came into politics as a representative of an ethnic German party. They didn't demand assimilation from him, and conversely, his choice didn't affect Romanian identity in any way. State is one thing, nation another.

Eastern-type nationalism becomes dangerous when a nation hijacks the state and claims a monopoly on power. Then minorities are badly off. Not infrequently, Eastern European nationalists, especially in the interwar period, referred to the egalitarian unitarianism that prevailed in France, for example, without at the same time opening their nation as liberally to people of different origins as the French did—or did at least in terms of standards and ideology. Examples of such illiberal unitarianism were Turkey and, again, Romania. The most recent examples of the devastating violence of such ethnic nationalism as a state doctrine are the ethnic cleansings in the former Yugoslavia.

Chauvinism, anti-Semitism, exclusion, authoritarian rule and corruption are not specifically Eastern. Both understandings of nation, the West and the East European one, contain their dangers for peaceful coexistence. The West tends to become aggressive and authoritarian when an ideology or a movement, a party, a charismatic leader takes control of the state, and corruption prevails when the state is weak. If the movement dies, the party disintegrates, if the charismatic leader is overthrown, the state is left behind—as happened in Spain or Portugal in the 1970s. Corruption disappears when the state becomes stronger because the citizens support it and respect its rules. Western nations become a danger to the rest of the world when they confuse themselves with humanity, when they feel called to world domination thanks to their alleged supremacy, when they become missionaries and disregard the rights of others. The paradigm for this is colonialism. For England, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium, the colonial empires were identity-forming.

If I may venture a prognosis, then the future in Europe should belong to the national feeling of the Eastern type. Why? In most Western European countries, the proportion of foreign-born populations is now between 15 and 20 percent—too high for immigrants to be assimilated into a nation according to the old Western model. A significant proportion of the newcomers come from Eastern European countries, some of which have lost more than 20 percent of their population to Western countries. Already today, more Bulgarian children are born outside Bulgaria than in the country itself, and more Bulgarians are employed elsewhere in the West than in Bulgaria. The claims of these expatriate Bulgarians to the rule of law, to democracy and social justice are directed at the countries in which they live. It would be absurd if their representatives came to their eastern homeland to propagate an understanding of the nation that is just now outliving itself in the West.