Ethnopopulism and the Global Dynamics of Nationalist Mobilization

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There is little doubt that nationalism has become a popular topic in the media of late. For scholars of nationalism and ethnic conflict, the ubiquity of nationalism is not novel. With the global rise of parties, political leaders and debates that focus on nativism, populism and illiberalism, convenient boundaries have been challenged. Research on nationalism and ethnic conflict has only slowly transcended regional boundaries, often with the implicit assumption that nationalism or ethnic conflict are the domain of non-Western societies. While the assumption of modernization theory that modernization will eventually overcome nationalism has been debunked decades ago (Newman, 1991), nationalism is often understood as a localized consequence of the ‘end of history’ and declining idea in an era of globalization. Such a conclusion might have been tempting, as ethnic conflict declined in since a spike during the 1990s following the end of the cold war.

While these views are certainly misleading, I have argued that the opposite, namely viewing a global rise in virulent nationalism in every election, speech or populist party is equally unhelpful. The data I have looked at allow for skepticism that there is a clear global trend in the rise of nationalism. The second argument is, maybe rather implicit, that nationalism is not rising by itself, but is rather caused by other factors. Thus, virulent nationalism is rarely a cause, but a consequence of other aspects of social change.

Jenne, Csergő and Malešević have offered some important additional insights and contributed to a debate on nationalism today. In my response, I will elaborate on the importance of the relationship between populism and nationalism pointed out by Csergő and Jenne. In addition, I will reflect on the methodologically limitations of studying nationalism through surveys and other data, including election results, an important point raised by Malešević. First, however, I will turn to the question whether there is a gradual and continuous increase in habitual or latent nationalism, as Malešević argues, which is the underpinning feature of today’s world.

The skepticism about the global rise of virulent nationalism does not deny the relevance of latent or habitual nationalism today and the importance of nationalism as a structuring feature of social relations. Nationalism and citizenship, both separately and jointly shape
the contemporary world, from the United Nations, International Relations to Nationality, the nation is at the core of the political and social organization of most of the globe.

Just like the spread of the modern state eliminated the remaining white spots on the map so that there is no more terra nullius, the concurrent spread of nationalism apparently eliminated the ‘homo nullius’, the person without national identity. The national ambivalence that characterized most societies as recently as a century ago has been drastically reduced (Zahra, 2010). Yet, unlike a territory that might be effectively claimed by one state, individuals are not inherently part of a given nation, but as Brubaker has convincingly argued, require constant efforts to be convinced about the centrality of national belonging (Brubaker, 2006). Thus, while agreeing with Malešević on the overall spread and prevalence of nationalism today, I would more skeptical about the unidirectional expansion of nationalism. Ethnic entrepreneurs constantly need to reaffirm the importance of the nation. There are new phenomena of national ambivalence today that suggest that as scholars we should remain skeptical to the claim of nationalists that humanity is inherently organized into nations. If we take the EU and the emerging Europeanness as a supranational identity, as also noted in my original essay, we can observe that supranational identity matter and thrive. While it might only be a small minority of Europeans who identify solely European (according to the 2018 Eurobarometer 2%), still there are about the same number of Europeans as Greeks or Czechs in the EU and a larger number than citizens of 16 EU member states. Considering the possibility of multiple identities, most Europeans see themselves as both citizens of their country and of the European Union, all of which are trends that have increased during a period largely ascribed to be one of rising nationalism (Eurobarometer, 2018). This is not to argue that Europeanness is replacing nationalism, but it is important to note that there are countervailing trends to nationalism.

The key question remains, when these habitual, or latent expressions of nation and citizenship become exclusionary, violent and dominate the political choices and debates in a given society. Here, both Jenne and Csergő make an important point about the mutually reinforcing dynamics of populism and ethnic nationalism, which I fully agree with. This ‘ethnopopulism’, as Jenne terms it, is revisionist and seeks to challenge the liberal internationalist order that has prevailed since the 1990s. This challenge can be observed from domestic politics to international law (Hathaway & Shapiro, 2017).

I would fully subscribe to their argument that while nationalism by itself might not be on the global uptake, the combination of anti-liberal and anti-pluralist with nationalism is particularly combustible. I would argue that the main shift in past decade has been the rise of illiberal and competitive authoritarian regimes and parties around the world, and the erosion of democracies. Although there is some debate to the extent of democratic regression (Abramowitz & Repucci, 2018; Bermeo, 2016; Mounk & Foa, 2018; Plattner, 2015), the crisis of representative liberal democracy is clearly observable not just through democratic regression, but also the rise of populist parties.

Nationalism is merely one of the ideologies that autocrats and populists utilize. Other features can a fight against crime and corruption (Krastev, 2011), see Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who has boasted of ordering extrajudicial killings or Serbian president Vučić, who like many other populists came to power on the promise of fighting corruption. Another source of legitimacy is social conservatism, rejecting liberal policies, such the ruling Polish Law and Justice Party under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński, which emphasized Catholic and conservative values. Populist politicians also invariably direct their rhetoric against elites, be they those who are or where in power or some international
power centres. Nationalism can be part of this repertoire and clearly overlaps with key features of populism, namely the idea of a general will of the ‘people’ and the Manichean world view that is in search of enemies and boundary making (Mudde, 2016). I have sought to argue, however, that nationalism is not inherently virulent and thus ‘captured’ by populists in an effort to gain power, but instead, it is used as resource and cultivated by such parties. Thus, PiS in Poland gained elections based on disillusionment with the previous government and a population segment that has felt excluded from the rising prosperity of the country. In Hungary, it was the disillusionment with the previous parties that catapulted the ethnopopulist FIDESZ to power. Similarly in India, the success of Narendra Modi in India was based largely on dissatisfaction with the Congress Party, as with the victory of Shinzō Abe in Japan. Once in power, these politicians and party have also relied on nationalism, such as the anti-German and anti-Russian rhetoric of the Polish PiS, as well as the use of the anti-migrant discourse, despite the absence of migrants, use of historical revisionism and other features of exclusionary nationalism that resonate.

This would affirm the argument made by Malešević that latent nationalism is ready resource to draw on by elites. However, it does not dictate electoral victories and constitute a political or social force on its own. This returns to the argument I have sought to make that the rise of virulent nationalism is not the cause of the rise of authoritarian or illiberal parties and leaders, but vice-versa.

It is tempting to attribute the rise of nationalism and nativist policies to radical and populist parties. However, what made the parties success possible is largely the willingness of mainstream parties at the political centre to endorse, coopt or copy these parties or ideas. Here, we can identify four strategies: (a) in some cases, traditional parties have accepted ethnopopulists as coalition partners, as in Austria, for example, where the conservative Austrian People’s Party formed a coalition with the far-right Freedom Party of Austria; (b) in other cases, they have sought to copy key programmatic features, as has been the case by the Bavarian conservative Christian Social Union; (c) in Hungary the conventional centre-right party FIDESZ itself moved to the far right, without being prompted by a far-right competitor and (d) the case of the Republican Party in the United States highlights the willingness of a conventional centre-right party to be captured or subverted by ethnopopulist ideas and candidates, as had been the case with the Tea Party and eventually Trump.

Thus, a crucial feature, together with the change of established parties has been a shift of the discursive frame of what kind of ideas can be legitimately expressed in the public arena. Take for example, the book Finis Germania (the End of Germany), written by the late historian Rolf Peter Sieferle and published by his estate in a small far-right German publishing house. Despite the anti-Semitic undertones and critique of the dominant discourse about World War Two and the Holocaust in Germany, the book made it on the list of the ‘non-fiction books of the month’ recommended by jury organized a regional public broadcaster and the liberal daily Süddeutsche Zeitung. It subsequently became a bestseller, topping charts on Amazon and (briefly) in the weekly Der Spiegel. While this success triggered a heated public debate, the fact that an obscure publication by a minor far-right publisher could achieve such public success would have been unimaginable a few years ago. Similarly, the constant barrage of lies and half-truths of the Trump administration has also shifted the discourse in the United States. The talk of ‘fake news’ or ‘alternative facts’ has become normalized.

This atmospheric shift, or to use the suitable German term of ‘Zeitgeist’, literally the spirit of the times, has occurred in many European societies and the United States. It
would be problematic to make the claim that such a shift would be global. Indeed, both the causal mechanism and the social and political differences suggest that this phenomena is linked to these societies (Schaible, 2018). While in Europe, it would be tempting to seek the cause in the migrant crisis of 2014–2015, as the image of a large-scale influx of refugees and immigrants shaped European public debates. However, this would not explain why one could observe a similar shift in the United States, which had been unaffected or why some European countries, like Spain experience no particular increase in far-right politics, despite experiencing large-scale immigration.

Beyond the question whether cultural or economic arguments or features of the established political system explain the rise of illiberal ethnopopulists (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018), the core question thus is, why did mainstream society become more accepting to the articulation of such ideas. Thus, understanding the destructive power of combination of nationalism and illiberalism, requires examining the weakness of the defense for liberal democracy and failure to reject radical revisionist ideas. As Jenne points out, the role of elites is central in interpreting the public sphere during critical junctures. The different responses of elites can explain the variety of outcomes of how much the public sphere shifted to include and legitimize revisionist ethnopopulist ideas. Thus, crucially, understanding the dangers of virulent nationalism needs an understanding of the causes that lie not only or even mainly with the latent nationalism, but rather with elite consensus vs. polarization, the legitimacy of liberal democracy and other factors external to nationalism.

Finally, Malešević raises the methodological question whether nationalism can be grasped through surveys. He argues convincingly that surveys are of limited value, as the proxies used to measure the relevance of nationalism, such as pride in the nation, the exclusion of particular groups and other measures might effectively capture nationalism in one context, but not in another. In particular if states and nations are not congruent, as in the case of Korea, Hong Kong or Taiwan, confusion can easily arise between pride in the state and nation, which might point in different directions. This points to a larger methodological challenge of nationalism. If asked whether a person holds nationalist views, the answers will vary depending on whether nationalism has a negative or positive connotation in the overall society. In Europe, nationalism holds distinct negative connotations and few would volunteer to identify themselves as ‘nationalists’. However, in other regions, in particular where a national identity is seen as a counterweight to either colonialism or sub-national ethnic belonging, nationalism holds more positive connotations. Of course, this does not mean that respondents in these contexts are more nationalist, but are merely more likely to respond positively to such questions. Furthermore, this difference raises the question whether in global comparisons we should focus on ethnic identity that often rejects or challenges state-level nationalism or whether the latter should be at the centre. When studying Rwanda, most would agree that it is Hutu and Tutsi identity that deserves more attention when exploring global nationalism rather than the overarching Rwandan identity the Kagame regime has been seeking to instill. However, when examining the relationship between radical Turkish nationalism that denies the existence of sub-national groups, such as Kurds, research on nationalism would be ill advised to ignore this denial of sub-state identity. As nationalism can be associated with nearly any type of group defined through difference to other groups, the focus of researchers exploring the global phenomena is challenging. This is reflected also in the difficulty of political scientists in finding plausible criteria for determining the ethnonational fragmentation of societies, as
the nature of division is inherently subjective, even if it often draws on objective distinctions (Laitin & Posner, 2001; Norris, 2008). With all these caveats in mind, some measures do provide insight into the significance of identifying with a nation. For example, the support for homogenous polities can offer and understanding of an exclusionary understanding of nationalism. In other cases, the support for ethnic sub-national identities can provide insight into the strength of overarching state-level identity. In addition and not explored in my article, ethnic distance, i.e. the measure of acceptance of members of ethnic groups based on different settings, in public and private life, can shed light on nationalist attitudes. Furthermore, if we acknowledge regional diversity and the country specific context, time series allows us to identify change in a particular country and region. If the measures do capture key features of nationalism in the specific context, such as the position towards National Socialism or anti-Semitism in Germany, change can indicate an increase or drop of nationalism.

Of course, surveys, census results and election outcomes can only offer a bird-eye view. The micro-processes of nationalism, from the everyday practices and the causal mechanisms of change do require other methods and more in-depth analysis.

Overall, I share the more pessimistic assessment of the commentators that nationalism is an important force shaping global politics. What I caution against, is to attribute too much causality to nationalism rather than other phenomena, such as illiberalism and the crisis of representative democracy, as well as the temptation of not making sufficient regional distinction in noting these wider trends.

References


