

Nationalism and national movements: comparing the past and the present of Central and Eastern Europe*

MIROSLAV HROCH

Filosofická Faculta, University Karlovy, nam. J. Palacha 2, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT. This article compares the ‘new nationalism’ in post-communist countries since the 1980s with the ‘classical’ national movements of the nineteenth century. Looking for analogies and differences between these two processes, it seeks to achieve a better understanding and more profound interpretation of contemporary ‘nationalism’. Most important analogies are: both national movements emerged as a result of (and as an answer to) the crisis and disintegration of an old regime and its value system; in both cases we observe a low level of political experience among the population, the stereotype of a personalised nation, and of a defensive position. Similarly both movements define their national border by both ethnic and historical borders: in both cases, the nationally relevant conflict of interests plays a decisive role. Among the differences are: the extremely high level of social communication in the twentieth-century movements, combined with a ‘vacuum at the top’ (the need for new elites) and with deep economic depression. The ‘contemporary’ national movements fought for the political rights of undoubtedly pre-existing nations (above all, for full independence), while the ‘classical’ ones fought for the concept of a nation-to-be, whose existence was not generally accepted. Nevertheless, in both cases, similar specifics of the nation-forming process under conditions of a ‘small nation’ can be observed. The author does not view nationalism as a ‘disease’ or external force: but rather as an answer given by some members of the nation to new challenges and unexpected conflicts of interests, which could be interpreted as national ones.

The exciting experience of the current ‘revival of nationalism’ represents for a historian of nation-forming processes a kind of testing ground, giving him the opportunity to verify his theories. The primary aim of this article is to determine whether or not we could use the results of historical research on the nation-forming process in order to explain current nationalism, national movements and ethnic conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe.

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Five or six years ago, when the first strong expressions of the 'new nationalism' emerged, the question was above all: how to explain the sudden emergence of nationalist feelings, proclamations and actions? The most frequent and 'fashionable' answer was the following: under communist rule, nationalism was forbidden, but it had survived from pre-communist times and it now becomes again the active ideology, because communism did not solve the 'national problem'. We could give some persuasive empirical and theoretical arguments against this 'fridge theory', but I do not think that it would be useful to present them here: this 'fridge theory' has been disproved by the experience of the last five years and has become a thing of the past.

Nevertheless, what survives is the concept of nationalism as some kind of epidemic disease, which can be and has to be treated: the only problem seems to be to find the right medicine and the proper method of treatment. At the outset I have to admit that I strongly disagree with this voluntaristic concept. We have to find a deeper explanation of this phenomenon. As a historian, I have tried to understand and interpret it in its ancestry, in its historical perspective.

First of all, it is necessary to say something about the term itself. I have my doubts concerning the explanatory competence of the term 'nationalism', which is used in so many different meanings that it makes mutual understanding difficult. For this reason, I use this term only in its limited sense, which is its original one, i.e. not as a synonym for national identity or a national programme, but as a state of mind (collective mentality), that gives priority to the interests and values of one's own nation over all other interests and values. Trying to interpret the national conflicts and changes of the last decade, I regard it as more practical to use the term 'national movement', understood as organised efforts to achieve all the attributes of a 'fully fledged' nation, i.e. to obtain all attributes characterising already existing nation-states.

To make my interpretations more comprehensible, it is necessary to formulate some premises, without attempting to give a detailed explanation.

- 1 We cannot interpret the phenomenon 'nationalism' without taking into account the real existing large social group 'nation', which emerged as the result of a long nation-forming process, which had its prehistory in Middle Ages.
- 2 The key element of the analysis of this nation-forming process is not 'nationalism', but national identity.
- 3 The nation-forming process, the emergence of modern nations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was not an 'error of history', as some intellectuals suggest, but a natural part of the transformation of modern European society, parallel to industrialisation, capitalism, constitutionalism etc.
- 4 The emergence of nations, national identities and nationalisms is not a specifically Eastern development, but part of an overall European

development, naturally including some typological differences and a high degree of unevenness in time.

- 5 Analyzing nationalism in the proper, narrow sense of the word, we should prefer unbiased causal examination to moralistic preaching and denunciations.

Living under Soviet rule, nations in Eastern and Central Europe experienced limited independence or even total loss of independence. They lived not only under the political, but also under the cultural and economic rule of the communist nomenclatura. It was understandable that some members of these nations started a national agitation, trying to persuade members of their own nation that the time for a renewed full national existence was coming. This was the moment when new national movements started.

National movements are, nevertheless, a much older phenomenon. Originally, national movement was one of two main types (forms) of nation-forming process during the nineteenth century. To understand this view, I have to mention some actual dates. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there existed in Europe only eight state-nations with a more or less developed literary language, a tradition of high culture and established ruling elites: the English, French, Spanish (Castilian), Dutch, Portuguese, Danish, Swedish and later Russian nation-states. The nation-forming process inclined in these cases towards a modern nation as a community of equal citizens and passed for an integral part of political modernisation of the state.

On the other hand, there existed at the very same time more than thirty ethnic groups (nationalities) without statehood, or with a weak or no continuity of literary language and without 'their own' ruling elites. All of them lived within the territory of multiethnic empires, e.g. the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, tsarist Russia, but also Great Britain, Spain and Denmark. This was the situation, which I called originally a nation-forming process under conditions of a 'small nation'. Today, I accept the more suitable term 'non-dominant ethnic group'. Sooner or later, some members of this group decided to start national agitation demanding all the attributes of a fully fledged nation: they started the decisive phase of their national movement. In some cases, this national agitation started very early, around the year 1800 (the Greeks, Czechs, Norwegians, Irish), in some others one generation later (the Finns, Croats, Slovenes, Flemish, Welsh etc.), or even during the second half of the nineteenth century (Latvians, Estonians, Catalans, Basques etc.). If national agitation was successful, it achieved the support of the masses and opened the way to a fully formed nation. Sometimes, national agitation did not achieve its goal or had to fight for mass support for a very long time (the Flemish, Welsh, Byelorussians). Nationalism in the narrow sense of the word was but an accompanying component of this process, not its main force. Its participation and influence in the national movement strengthened during the third phase (the phase of mass movement).

Is this type of national movement we know from the nineteenth century, comparable with those we have witnessed since the 1980s? My answer is affirmative: the points of departure of each process are analogous, as are their goals, which can be divided into three groups:

- 1 Political demands, which in contemporary national movements are strongly concentrated towards independence, while in the nineteenth-century in most cases self-administration and some degree of autonomy were preferred.
- 2 Cultural demands, which tried to establish and strengthen an independent culture and national literary language.
- 3 Social demands, which asked for a just division of national income and tried to achieve a full social structure in the emerging national society, corresponding to the stage of capitalist transformation of the multi-ethnic state.

If we compare the historical explanation of 'classical' national movements with contemporary developments, we find some significant analogies and, naturally, also some differences. Let me summarise them, illustrating the possibilities of interpreting current developments as part of long-term processes.

1 The transition to the decisive phase of national agitation occurred almost at the same time as the old regimes and social systems were in crisis. As old ties disappeared or weakened, the need for a new group identity brought together, under the auspices of one national movement, people belonging to different classes and groups. Similarly, following the breakdown of the systems of planned economy and communist control, old ties disappeared. Under conditions of general uncertainty and lack of confidence, the national idea assumed an integrating role. These were stressful circumstances, and people usually over-estimated the protective effect of their national group.

2 Identification with a national group includes, as it did in the last century, the construct of the personified and personalised nation. The glorious history of this personalised nation is understood as the, or a, personal past of each of its members. Its defeats are understood as personal failures and continue to affect their feelings. As a result of this personalisation, people regard their own nation – which they equate with themselves – as one body. If any misfortune befalls a small section of the nation, then the whole 'body' feels the pain of that misfortune. If a small group belonging to the ethnic group – even if living in a different state from the 'mother-nation' – is endangered by assimilation, the members of the personified nation interpret it as an amputation of a part of the national 'body'.

3 Like the classical national movements, the personalised and personified national body needs a distinct space. This space was – and is also today – defined in two different and controversial ways. First, it is defined in terms of its ethnic homogeneity, a homogeneity which is primarily delimited as a linguistically (or religiously) bound cultural space. Secondly, it is defined by

historical frontiers of 'national' territory, which could, in many cases, also include other ethnic groups and minorities. This second criterion is symptomatic of the so-called 'historical nations', for example, Magyars regarding the historical kingdom of Hungary as their own national body, Czechs similarly in 'their' historical Kingdom of Bohemia and Margravate of Moravia, Croats, who look upon all three parts of the medieval kingdom (Croatia, Dalmatia, Slavonia) as 'their own' etc. These situations have even more analogies today for, besides the established *historical nations*, we find a new group of nations – that is, nations which enjoyed their independence (including state borders) during the short inter-war period, for example, Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, and even those whose independence was only realised during the Second World War as Nazi 'protectorates', the case of Croats and Slovaks. Furthermore, in such cases, many leaders of national movements interpret state frontiers as national frontiers, and regard the ethnic minorities within 'their own' territory as outlanders, in the end worthless enough to be expelled or to have their national identity neglected.

4 National agitation began during the nineteenth century, usually in conditions when members of the non-dominant ethnic group did not have any political experience in civic society, nor any political education. For these reasons, they could hardly formulate political arguments and slogans for civil and human rights in the modern sense of the word. 'Freedom' for Czech or Estonian peasants meant the abolition of feudal domination and the free use of their farmland, not freedom of speech or parliamentary elections. The notions of common language and customs, however, were much more comprehensible to them. Having spent more than fifty (or even seventy) years under dictatorial regimes, the mentality of the people is once again such that in many countries, linguistic, cultural and social demands play a surrogate political role. Nevertheless, the importance of ethnicity is not equally prevalent in all modern day national movements. In some cases, especially under conditions of Soviet rule, the language of the ruling nation remained a symbol of political oppression in the eyes of, for example Estonians and Lithuanians, even when the character of political oppression differed from that of the nineteenth century. In these recent cases the language of a small nation fighting for independence was automatically viewed as the language of liberty.

5 During the nineteenth century, members of non-dominant ethnic groups were disadvantaged by the unwillingness of ruling nations to accept the real equality of all languages, that is, equality of the language of the ruling nation with the language of the non-dominant ethnic groups. The members of ruling nations, for example, Germans or Magyars (after 1867), refused to learn and use the language of ethnic groups living in 'their' territory. After the emergence of the new independent national states in 1918–19, members of the former ruling nations became national minorities in the newly formed states. Yet they remained unwilling to accept the equality of language of the small, but now ruling, nations of for example,

Czechs, Romanians, Serbs, Croats, etc., and this made for potentially explosive situations at the threshold of the Second World War. Currently, members of the former ruling nations, and particularly Russians (and also Serbs), have once again, as a result of successful national movements, become minorities in the newly emerged and emerging states, such as Estonia, Lithuania and Croatia. The parallel between the real fate and historical role of the *Volksdeutsche* and the potential role of the *Volksrussen* is striking.

6 National movements sanctified some national demands by the fact that their non-dominant ethnic group was endangered through assimilation: they emphasised their defensive character. Similarly today, the defence of 'national existence', of 'national rights' creates an illusion of moral immunity, which is stressed especially by the nationalist wing of the movement.

7 The overestimation of ethnic elements and linguistic demands is symptomatic of a specific feature of contemporary national movements. It is the illusion of a 'replay', of a 'repeat performance'. The leaders of the new national movements, believing that they could utilise the successful methods of their 'classical' national movements, hold that old ethnic values can be resuscitated. This 'replay' mentality makes it difficult for a researcher to distinguish between real and replayed needs, between stereotypes and sincerely formulated demands.

8 If we ask why national agitation during the nineteenth century achieved the support of the masses, we find everywhere (besides intensified social communication and mobility) one factor, which was undervalued in traditional research on 'nationalism'. This factor could be called 'nationally relevant conflict of group interests', which means social and political conflicts or tensions that coincided with linguistic (or eventually religious) differences. Let me illustrate this kind of conflict by some examples: a conflict between peasants belonging to the non-dominant ethnic group and the landlords from the dominant nation; between the 'centre' and the 'province'; between traditionalist village and the town; between new academics from the non-dominant ethnic group and the old elites belonging to the ruling nation. Nationally relevant conflicts of interests of today may differ in part from those of the nineteenth century, but they also play an important role as an integral element of new national movements.

There exist, nevertheless, not only similarities and analogies but also important differences. To mention them means also to take them into account as explanatory factors in recent research.

1 National movements during the nineteenth century constituted a part and a form of the nation-forming process – and the fully fledged nation emerged as a result, which was not at all a self-evident result. Contemporary national movements enter the battlefield in the name of a nation which came into existence just before they started. The goal in 1990 was not to create a new entity, but to restore the previously existing one.

2 There is an important difference caused by the immense intensity of social communication. For this reason, all the processes that we know from the nineteenth century are highly accelerated.

3 The modern mass media are now strong enough to manipulate populations, to distort or intensify in what they portray conflicts of interests where they do not exist, that is, to promote or diminish the danger of aggressive nationalism.

4 There is a difference in social structure. The present situation, marked by the 'vacuum at the top' as a result of the sudden disintegration of the system of planned economy and the nomenclatura ruling class, is unique in European history. New elites, educated under the old regime but belonging to the new national movements, are successfully trying to achieve the status of ruling elites. As the educated members of non-dominant ethnic groups tried to achieve ruling status during the nineteenth century, they had to fight for each single position among the established elites of the ruling nation. At the same time, they had to maintain the way of life and the value system of these established ruling classes. In the recent cases, there is no previous establishment and upward social mobility is not influenced by any surviving traditional systems or moral norms – except individual and national selfishness. I must point out that the disintegration of the old nomenclatura ruling class has not occurred in all the countries under survey. In countries such as Serbia nationalism has been manipulated by them in order to enable them to stay in power.

5 During the nineteenth century, nationally relevant conflicts were above all conflicts which resulted from modernisation and reflected the general trend of economic growth joined to social improvement. In the recent cases, these conflicts are instead a response to a short-term depression and decline, to the fact that the 'cake' has become smaller. Even though this does not imply that this decline is irreversible, the psychological effect is strong: events being condensed into a short period of a few years, allows short-term decline to act in the same way as long-term decline.

So much for the situation at the turn of the decade. What changed, however, during the last four or five years? Most national movements quickly achieved their principal goal: political independence. New nation-states are emerging in Slovenia, Slovakia, Byelorussia, Macedonia and so on. For this reason, national movements in most countries are disappearing, after having achieved their main goals. Nevertheless, what about nationalism and conflicts between nation-states? Let us start by giving some actual cases. Since the retreat of the Yugoslav army, we hear very little about Slovene nationalism; since the division of Czechoslovakia, nationalist groupings in Slovakia have become weaker and they have almost disappeared in the Czech Republic. In Poland, nationalist slogans get no real support. Nationalist parties lost in last elections in Lithuania and Hungary and similar developments seem to be happening in Ukraine and Bulgaria. The only regions where nationalism gained strength are those where national

movements did not achieve their goals: in former Yugoslavia and in Russia. It would be too optimistic to say that nationalism in post-communist countries is definitely disappearing, but there is no doubt that it is weaker than it was five years ago when the national movements started.

This positive trend is not the merit of the 'European idea' or of anti-nationalist humanist intellectuals, but the result of social and political changes. In most of the cases mentioned above, the nation-states became independent without being seriously endangered from abroad. Social tensions and conflicts of interests are still strong, but those which are nationally relevant are rare, especially in monoethnic states, such as Poland, Slovenia or the Czech Republic. At the same time, the vacuum at the top in these states is filled and there are some signs of economic improvements for the future.

This is, nevertheless, only one side of the coin. On the other side, there are countries where nationalist conflicts ended in bloodshed. Remember Bosnia, Croatia, the Caucasus. How can we explain this difference?

If we accept the view that the nationalism is not an abstract disease but a state of mind of actual human beings, we are able to formulate the precondition for its strengthening, as occurs in some European regions. Favourable conditions for a growing force of nationalism can be summarised as follows:

- 1 The vacuum at the top is still not filled and the fight for political power and for leading positions in the economy are not limited by old value systems or by the 'rules of the game' of democratic civil society: the struggle for these positions becomes the nationally relevant conflict of interests.
- 2 The decline of the economy and the standard of living is hopelessly deep and the ethnic situation allows the agitators to denounce 'the others' as responsible for backward developments.
- 3 The difference between the nations is not defined primarily by differences of language, but by religion.
- 4 The political culture is forgotten or absent and is difficult to improve, sometimes being related to low levels of education.
- 5 The members of the former ruling nation were degraded to the level of an ethnic minority under the rule of the former oppressed nation.
- 6 The national tradition and myth, the 'collective memory', includes the tradition of fighting and dying for the nation as an extremely positive and morally binding value.

If we project these six points into concrete historical developments, we find without a doubt a striking and convincing coincidence of these factors only in one European country: in Bosnia. In other regions, we find only some of these factors, and on the other hand, these six destabilising factors are almost absent in countries with lower levels of the nationalist attitudes mentioned above.

To summarise, the first point of my conclusion is: the 'new nationalism'

operates in different countries with rather different emphases. The explosion of aggressive nationalism that we are observing in former Yugoslavia is a rather unique case and cannot be generalised as the main trend in all former communist countries.

On the contrary, we are observing a retreat of nationalism in some of them, as a result of changing social and political realities. Even though this retreat cannot be generalised, it is an important sign for two reasons. Above all, it demonstrates the importance of the nationally relevant conflict of interests as a stimulating force of nationalism. Secondly, it allows us to put the phenomenon 'nationalism' into an appropriate framework.

Nationalism – this has to be stressed once more – is not a malady, not a virus which could be exterminated forever by an appropriate treatment. Nationalism is a potential function and product of actually existing national identities. As long as nations exist, nationalism will remain as a latent answer to problems and challenges. In this sense, it can be regarded as a latent danger – not only in Eastern Europe, but also in Western Europe.

Sometimes, the difference between the 'nationalist East' and the 'democratic West' is based to the concept of democracy as the best treatment which can be used to prevent or exterminate nationalism. The relation between democracy and the nation-forming process is, nevertheless, more complicated. Naturally, constitutionalism and democracy are an inevitable condition of civil society, but it would be a wrong deduction to say that national movements and democracy exclude each other. On the contrary, in many cases, the oppressed nations perceived democracy as a suitable instrument to be used by their national movement.

For this reason, democracy cannot be regarded as a universal treatment for nationalism. The decisive role that emerging or weakening nationalism plays, as in the past, is in response to nationally relevant conflicts of interests, conditioned by a high intensity of social communication and mobility. These conflicts of interests can under given conditions be either real or constructed. The emergence of nationally relevant conflicts of interests in reality is usually an answer to some social, economical or political crisis and, for this reason, cannot be prevented by learned arguments or humanist speeches. Nevertheless, its constructed form could be avoided by responsible mass media. Even though this sounds utopian, it is proven by experience that emergent nationalism will find it difficult to persuade a majority, if it happens under conditions of constitutionalism and high political culture.

The usual concluding question, addressed to 'experts', is: what must be done? I cannot escape this question, but I prefer its modified version: what can be done? Naturally, the historian is not qualified to recommend treatments: he prefers to summarise and generalise empirical observations. The utopian concept of creating a civil society as an alternative to the national one has failed. It is not the place here to analyse the reasons for this failure: one of these reasons is, nevertheless, its ignorance of reality, its

neglect of actual nations and of existing conflicts of interests after the breakdown of Communism.

However, the central problem is how to prevent conflicts of interests expanding into nationally relevant ones. One way, as mentioned above, is to avoid artificially constructed conflicts 'produced' by mass media. Naturally, this is difficult under conditions of a free society. Even more difficult is to prevent real emerging conflicts: can it happen through social engineering or by improving the economic conditions? If we accept the fact that conflicts of interest are inevitable, then the only way seems to be – at least in theory – to avoid the transformation of these conflicts into national ones. This can only partially be influenced by moralistic preaching, but it can be proved by historical record that under conditions of political culture and the potency of political consensus, this transformation can be avoided or minimalised. In such cases, the conflict of interests would be expressed in political terms, instead of being translated into national terms. Nevertheless, all these considerations will remain merely as some kind of intellectual game, until we learn how to improve the economy and political culture of post-communist countries.