The enchantment of homogeneous national culture in East Central Europe

Balázs Trencsényi*

* [trencsenyib@ceu.edu] (Central European University)

This introduction helped situate contemporary migrations in the historical context of how cultural authenticity was projected onto different parts of Europe, especially Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

In this introduction, I have two aims. One is to give a historical overview of why a nativist mode of thinking or speaking is so well-entrenched in East Central European cultural traditions. This can also be an explanation of why it was relatively easy to mobilise people against migration in the 2010s. The other is why this region can operate as a kind of 'Disneyland of authenticity' not only for Chinese but also for Russian, American, British, Dutch and other migrants.

If we take a historical perspective, an important aspect is the competition of the local nobilities with the imperial bureaucracies and their clients, who tried to take away their privileges. For instance, Hungarian nobility realised *en masse* that they were actually culturally and linguistically Hungarian only in the late 18th century under the pressure of Viennese "Enlightened Absolutism". Before that, they did not really seem to care too much. Same with the Polish gentry after the partition of Poland. In the mid-18th century they still believed that they could adjust to any sovereign provided that their noble privileges were respected. But when they became part of the partitioning empires, they realised that empires are all (de)nationalising to a certain extent, and they started to protect and cherish their national tradition. They started to dress in 'national' garb.

In the 19th century, this discursive framework shifts once again. There is a general obsession with the death of the nation, which is a Herderian term but is picked up by Romantic intellectuals and 'awakeners' everywhere. This also contributes to the legitimisation of the national liberal reform discourses, which are ultimately about catching up to the West but combined with some sort of local tradition. So, the Eastern European national liberal modernisation projects – and these were the projects that would create the modern nation in this part of the world - are about how local traditions can be made somehow compatible with Western modernity. This is the period when they were trying to revalorise local premodern forms of self-government as precursors of Western parliamentarianism. The idea was not simply to adopt the institutions of British parliamentarianism, but to prove that Hungarian noblemen in the 13th century already had analogous traditions. These nativist discursive structures legitimised the import of Western political modernity. At the same time, the national romantic frame goes together with the expectation that the national spirit can assimilate everybody. So, this is not an ethnoculturalist discourse in this respect.

There is yet another change in the second half of the 19th century. With the modernisation of the epistemic frameworks of politics and the coming of positivism, comparative

dimensions are opened up for thinking about the nation. But ironically, this framework is also much warier about assimilation. So, on the one hand, the nation becomes structurally more open, on the other hand, much more closed; it is less allowing for swift assimilation of non-co-ethnic groups.

It is in this context that the first debates about immigration emerge and become connected to the question of naturalisation. For example, in Romania the debates about Jewish citizenship erupt when the Western powers set it as a condition for accepting the newly emerging Romanian state as a 'civilised' partner. What to do with Jews who are emigrating from the Russian Empire? The second half of the 19th century saw a moral panic in most of the Eastern European countries with regard to the 'influx of aliens,' in some ways prefiguring the early 21st century moral panic about Muslim immigration. There are close parallels.

Lastly, in this period, the ideological nativisation of religious cult and institutions gets reinforced. Religious denominations up to the late 19th century are purportedly universalistic or at least supra-national and the church leadership still condemned the national 'deviation' of some of the local clergy (this was called 'philetism' in the Orthodox context), but in the late 19th century there is a nationalisation or nativisation of religious tradition ('national Catholicism,' 'national Orthodoxy,' and even more emphatic versions of 'national Protestantism'). It is a crucial phenomenon because it creates a situation where spiritual, biological, and social-cultural factors could be pushed together into a homogenised binary opposition of insiders and outsiders, those who are part of the ethnocultural community and those who are not.

After the First World War, the naturalisation of the ethnic 'others' is completed in the whole region, being stipulated by the post-war peace framework and the problematic but still existing directives of minority protection. In those countries where this is actually the most neuralgic question (such as Romania and Poland), it is perceived to be a Western meddling with the internal affairs and in some ways it reinforced the discourse about the clash of allogenous and indigenous groups. Even within these legally unified post-WWI societies, there remained a very strong consciousness of insiders and outsiders. The stake was not so much legal rights, but competition for resources: educational resources, access to jobs, social mobility, and so on. Of course, this was even more pressing in countries where there was a radical scarcity after the Great War: but it is telling that ideas of 'numerus clausus' popped up not only in the defeated countries like Hungary, but also in its seemingly more successful neighbours.

The interwar period witnessed the emergence of new ideological constructs: national or ethnic ontologies, which are complex intellectual projects of constructing nativism as the ultimate matrix of legitimisation – connecting space, culture, and time (history) into one metaphysical entity of national authenticity. Insiders and outsiders are also constructed metaphysically; the true natives have an ontological status of being the carriers of the true national tradition, while everybody else is an outsider, even if they had lived on the territory for a thousand years. So, certain insiders can be redefined as outsiders. They can be religious minorities, ethnic minorities, social cultural groups, and so on. Even without decipherable external features of alterity, spiritually, they could be the constructed as 'others,' and all the more dangerous as it was not that easy to unveil them as 'others.' During World War II, all these ideological constructs will feed into extremely bloody national homogenisation projects in this zone, not only the Holocaust but also the massacres and forced repatriation of minority groups (Poles, Ukrainians, Bosnians, Serbs, Albanians, etc).

These homogenisation processes did not stop with World War II. The state-building of the postwar period, irrespective of the relationship of democratic and communist components in the respective political culture, often continued the wartime logic of ethnic cleansing. So, radical democratic and communist political elites often completed what the Fascists or extreme right movements started.

The postwar dynamic of getting rid of the ethnic others within the regime was very successful and emotionally loaded. It often created the ideological underpinning for national communism, which focused both on the integration of the pre-communist national romantic canon as the master-narrative of identity, and was often entangled with the clash of "indigenous" and "allogenous" groups within the leadership of the Communist Party (which was also due to the fact that in most cases the interwar communist movement was indeed very successful in mobilising the ethnic minorities as it was offering an internationalist framework of identification, transcending the ethno-national cleavages permeating these societies). Similarly, rooted in the ideas of population management in a period of forced industrialisation, state socialist projects of pronatalism proliferated in most of these countries, focusing on raising birth-rates, and in some cases this was also increasingly ethnicised (like in Bulgaria where the state was worried about the demographic fall of the overall population and the presence of a sizeable Turkish minority).

Meanwhile, following the cataclysms of the immediate postwar period, with the solidification of the Iron Curtain and the autarchic economic policies of local Stalinist elites, there was relatively little cross-border population movement in these countries. Once the immediate postwar population movements – mostly forced – were over, borders became more or less closed (obvious exceptions are the pre-Berlin Wall emigration to the West and the temporary collapse of border control in Hungary during the 1956 Revolution). Still, there is some migration, for example outbound from Yugoslavia in the 1960s or inbound from socialist countries in the 1970s and 1980s, like Cuban, Vietnamese, and even a small number of Chinese guest workers. Smaller groups of leftist exiles were also accommodated in some of these societies (from the Greek communists, who managed to escape after the lost Civil War, to some South American intellectuals and activists). This is a microphenomenon compared to the macrophenomena I described above, but it generates quite interesting ethno-culturalist reactions such as Czech and East German anti-Vietnamese mobilisation in the early 1990s, which was connected to the challenge posed to the local working class by a very cheap work force in the moment of heightened anxiety. It is also important to mention that the pronatalist and nativist discourses - which are romantic and organicist, positivist – appeared also in the discourse of the anti-communist opposition in terms of a 'demographic panic.' So, while communist parties produced national communist narratives (in some cases, such as Romania after 1968, dominating the public sphere, in others, like Hungary, remaining more on the margins), in some cases there was also a local competition between ethnically diverse workers and an intellectually refined discussion about the 'death of the nation' in the 'grey zone' as well as in the opposition circles.

In sum, I would like to recall that, when various 'migrant crises' broke out in post-Cold War Europe, Western analysts often saw Eastern Europe as intrinsically intolerant due to its national homogeneity. It was said that Eastern Europeans were prejudiced because in comparison to Western Europe their societies were utterly homogeneous. Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán also plays to this view: we are luckily still homogeneous, he has said, and we don't want to be heterogeneous like you. I attempted to show that this is a very gross fal-

sification of historical trajectories in Eastern Europe, because these countries where historic-ally much more heterogeneous than Western European societies, where homogenisation took place much earlier. Exactly because of this heterogeneity, there was a persistent ideo-logical frame that divided people into insiders and outsiders. As many theoreticians, starting with the Hungarian István Bibó, pointed out, East Central European national projects were heavily influenced by ethno-culturalist discourses, triggered also by the fear of the disap-pearance, or "death," of the nation. So, even if the real plurality was there and also implied complex practices of everyday co-existence, there were also very strong and competing pro-jects of national homogenisation. Up to World War II it was ideological rather than real, because Eastern European societies were still extremely heterogeneous, irrespective of the dominance of the principle of nation-statehood advocated by the victors after World War I. During and after World War II, however, most of them became much more homogeneous, and by the 1980s, the memory of heterogeneity completely almost faded away. The fiction of ethnocultural purity and authenticity derives from the projects of ethnic competition aimed at making these societies homogeneous, rather than their historical homogeneity.

During the discussion, differences were raised between migration history and nativism in Eastern versus Western Europe. Local elites in the region, fearful of forceful assimilation into the empires, became hostile to immigrants as competitors. The romanticist origin of nativism was also emphas-ised: the symbolic language of national authenticity that was later recast in biological terms still shapes the discourse about immigration, emigration, and ethnic homogenisation up to now.