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Is Ethno-Nationalism a Paper Tiger?

First Draft

According to one of the once upon a time famous “quotations of President Mao”,

I said all allegedly powerful reactionaries are merely *paper tigers*. The reason is that they are divorced from the people².

Thus, a paper tiger is something that looks like frightening, but is really much less dangerous than its appearance, it looks like a tiger, but is really nothing more than an empty form shaped and pictured in order to make a transitory impression of awe.

After the collapse of Communist regimes in East Central and South Eastern Europe, ethno-nationalism was deemed as a possible cause of local and regional (Balcanic, European) war. As early as in Autumn 1989 Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs*, where he forecast that nationalism would be the driving force of politics in former communist states in the coming years:

The time has come for the West to confront as a policy issue a problem that for years most Western scholars have tended to ignore and that all Western policymakers still consider to be taboo: the rising tide of nationalism in Eastern Europe and especially in the Soviet Union itself. This long-dormant issue is now becoming, in a dynamic and conflictual fashion, the central reality of the once seemingly homogeneous Soviet world. (Brzezinski 1990).

After the erupting of hostilities in former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia, this gloomy forecast seemed to be confirmed in the worst possible way. From the academic point of view, a new wave of studies on ethnic conflict, both from the general-theoretic and the specific-empirical point of view flooded journals and libraries.

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However, the brutality of the war in Bosnia notwithstanding, violent ethnic conflict have so far been less spread in Europe than many of us had thought fifteen years ago (especially if we exclude the Caucasus area): in the longer run (and so far), integrating forces have seemed to have the upper hand in central European politics. One could reasonably argue that one among the factors that have so far contributed to put under control ethno-nationalist violence has been the perspective to be involved in the process of European integration. If this is true, Brussel's rational appeal to economic advantages has been stronger than the obscure forces of "blood and soil", and nationalism has been transformed into a factor of intra-European politics (among others), as the case of Poland makes clear. Should we draw the conclusion that ethno-nationalism is a paper tiger? The answer to this question requires a short review of what happened in the 1990s, and of some of the theoretical hypotheses underlying *the decade's grande peur*.

1. Real wars and feared conflicts

The fears of 1990 were unfortunately confirmed by a series of armed conflicts. The situation in East-Central Europe, the Balkans and the successor states to the Soviet Union in the first years after the collapse of communist regimes provided grounds for concern: war in Čečnyja, Moldova and Tažikistan, violent confrontation in Lithuania, crisis and war in Yugoslavia. Besides a spread of war in the successor states to the Soviet Union, there were two nightmares: a general Balkan war and a war for Hungarian *irredenta*, mainly in Slovakia and Romania. The two nightmares, in some especially pessimistic analysis, could solder into a general European war, because of the presence of a substantial Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, one of the two province in Serbia (the other was Kosovo) whose autonomy had been abolished by Milošević in 1989.

As it is well known, perhaps the worst events took place in former Yugoslavia, first in Slovenia (a relatively short and not bloody war), than in Croatia and Bosnia, finally in Kosovo. A very little number of politicians and scholars had forecast the brutality of the war in Croatia, and especially in Bosnia: massacres, deportations, systematic mass rapes, and all the worst collection of atrocity you can find in a war³.

² Excerpts from a speech at the Moscow Meeting of Representatives of the Communist and Workers' Parties, November 18, 1957. I found the quotation in http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_70.htm

³ However, some – insufficiently listened – experts understood the level of violence the war would reach. For example, I remember prof. Stefano Bianchini (University of Bergamo) saying, in a seminar in Rome organised at the end of 1989 by CeSPI, that the atrocities of the coming war would have equalled and exceeded those of the World War II.

However, some nightmares did not take the shape they were thought. It was the opinion of many people that the crisis of Yugoslavia had started in Kosovo, and would have an end there. This was Europe's nightmare, because the presence of an ethnically Albanian majority in that region would have triggered (according a good number of experts) first a war between Yugoslavia (or Serbia) and Albania, and after perhaps a war involving Turkey (and so soldering into a unique general war the Balkans, Caucasus, Russia and Central Asia). However, Kosovo was the end and not the start of horizontal escalation of a total Balkan war. Whatever your opinion on the NATO intervention, it did not cause an extension of the war. On the contrary, the international presence in Kosovo and Macedonia (or, more diplomatically, FYROM), contributed to stop the attempts of some militant Albanian group to activate a military insurrection in the Western part of Macedonia, where the most substantial part of the ethnic Albanians live. This same international presence was able to keep Turkey out of the crisis.

An even more impressive case was represented by Hungarian minorities in Rumania, Serbia and Slovakia. In Slovakia, Transylvania and Vojvodina, once a part of the kingdom of Hungary⁴, there are substantial ethnic Hungarian minorities. The fear was that, after the fall of communism, nationalist movement would gain importance in the domestic arena, and in Hungary public opinion would start to ask for a revision of the boundaries fixed at the Trianon Treaty (1920), and confirmed after World War II (1947)⁵. Moreover, the situation of minorities could have even worsened for the same reason, i.e. the role of nationalism in post-communist Rumania, Slovakia and Serbia. Nothing of this happened. This is the interesting case because it could prove that EU had an important role in influencing the management of minority problems in East Central Europe.

2. The “freezer” theory and its fallacies

The hypotheses generating the forecast of an escalation of violent conflicts can be found in a combination of mechanistic use of theories on nationalism, deterministic geopolitics and misuse of historic analogy. If you want to use a single title to label this attitude, you could call it a “freezer theory”: ethno-national conflicts, that often take place during the formation of states, would have been only “freezed” by communism, and now the natural forces of nations and nationalism would strike back. Each of these points deserves some attention.

⁴ Obviously, both during the independent existence of kingdom, until the Ottoman domination, and as a part of the Habsburg empire since the Peace of Karlowitz (1699) to the end of World War I.

⁵ During World War II Hungary annexed Western Transylvania

Ernst Gellner (1983) wrote that one of the opinions on nations and nationalism that are currently and generally considered wrong is that nationalism (for the best and the worse) represents the forces of “blood and soil” (*Blut und Boden*) that periodically and inevitably emerge. In other terms, according to this disqualified idea, nationalism would represent a sort of primeval (according to some: malefic) force, that consequently cannot be tamed. For the better and worse, the organisation of human communities into nations is an unavoidable destiny, and the ideology of nationalism, even in its most extreme forms, is a consequence of the repression of this “natural” form of human community. The hypothesis of the inevitability of the rise of nationalism is based – implicitly or explicitly – on these assumptions.

The second element is deterministic geopolitics. As we know, after 1989 geopolitics has been fashionable. The reading of post-1989 situation was framed in terms of present and absent hegemonies in certain areas of Europe. Even in the most articulated versions (Béhar 199?) the idea is that certain areas need some form of external hegemony to attain some form of regional international order. So, regional order in the Balkans was possible only with the Byzantine *oikoumene*, and during the centuries of the Ottoman rule, and after that with the Habsburg-Ottoman condominium (since the treaty of Karlowitz, 1699, to the Berlin Conference, 1878). According to this narrative, the phase of turbulence was ended only by the end of the Second World War and the bipolar order, that shaped a particular regional configuration. The end of this configuration with the collapse of Soviet hegemony in East-Central Europe and the crisis of post-Tito Yugoslavia would have “necessarily” implied a re-emergence of disruptive nationalist forces.

This reading of the situation in East Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe is influenced by an idea that the Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova defined as “Balkanism”, in some sense akin to Edward Said’s “Orientalism”. Balkanism sees Balkans and Balkanic people as a non European other in a theoretically European region. According to this view, the Balkans could become fully European only if they lose their main characteristics, to be “suspended” between the East and the West.

The third element was the false analogy with the First World War. Whereas there was an obvious analogy with the wars and instabilities in the Balkans at the beginning of the XX century, the absent element after the collapse of communist regimes was a real competition between external power for the hegemony in the area. Thus, with the exception of some parts of the Russian political spectrum, there was no real interest to support nationalist movement and parties in East Central Europe. There were indeed different ideas on the future of Yugoslavia in different countries of the

EU, among policy makers, diplomats, experts, even writers and intellectuals. As every knows or remembers, Germany supported the requests for independence of the various Yugoslav republics, whereas Britain, France and Italy were more supportive of the continuation of some form a unitary state, and thus were reluctant to any form of military intervention⁶. After almost twenty years, it is not difficult to see that often the dispute did not effectively concern the future of the Balkans. Many diplomats shared Handtke's feelings, and thought they would play again the games of XIX and early XX century. However, this internal strains of the EU, and different Russian views, were not enough to bring about a war.

One should also remember that at the time Mearsheimer wrote the famous (and I would say unfortunate) article "Back to the Future", according to which major European states would have resumed confrontational policies among themselves, and many thought the European Community (not yet Union) was going to collapse or dissolve in few years.

However, you could perceive in the first half of the 1990s, at least until the war in Bosnia started to show its potential of atrocity, a certain (verbal) nostalgia of the good old times of traditional diplomacy and war, when it was possible for each country to go her own way in foreign politics⁷. It is also possible⁸ that some diplomats in Western Europe would have liked to regain the space of manoeuvre they had enjoyed, as a social group, before the Cold War. Since diplomats are often psychologically conservative, they were trying to construct their new role according to a caricature of a XIX century *risiko* game.

This is a paradoxical reversal of classical Realism, that had a nostalgia for the international relations of XIXth century not because of a desire of the use of force, but because of the fear of that unlimited use of force that people like Hans Joachim Morgenthau or Raymond Aron could observe in two world wars.

So we had views distorted by a patronising vision of the region, rough ideas on nationalism and an overestimation of rivalries among European powers

3. A cultural-political discussion: Central Europe vs. nationalism?

Before and after 1989, other ideas and models had been discussed besides nationalism. Among them, the idea of Central Europe has been in the centre of interest for quite a long time.

⁶ On European policies concerning the conflicts in former Yugoslavia until 1995, see Lucarelli 1999.

⁷ The in-famous discourse of renationalisation of foreign policies (Goldmann 1997).

⁸ This is my impression, and this hypothesis would deserve some empirical verification.

Authors like the Czech exiled writer Milan Kundera, the Hungarian István Bibó, Czesław Miłosz started at the beginning of the 1980s a discussion on the idea of Central Europe⁹. This discussion had the obvious objective to create a cultural (and political) alternative to the Soviet hegemony in the area. This idea of Central Europe (for example, in Czech *Střední Evropa*) was different from the previous, German-centred idea of *Mitteleuropa*. The old *Mitteleuropa* was built around the German-speaking world, that at that time was not limited only to Germany and Austria, but included also German-speaking communities in many countries East of Germany.

The *Střední Evropa* of the 1980s was something different, included Soviet-dominated countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland. The real pole of definition and opposition to this central Europe was (historically) Russia, as a non-European country¹⁰. Milan Kundera, for example, argued that as a consequence of the Yalta agreement, Western Europe had lost a part of itself—Central Europe—which was and always had been a part of the West, historically, and, more important, culturally. Using the idea of Europe as an intellectual concept, Kundera never bothered to identify precisely the borders of Central Europe. It was clear, however, that he had in mind the Habsburg Empire: a multiethnic Europe in miniature, without internal borders and possessing a kind of intellectual commonwealth which was destroyed by Hitler and Stalin. The new Central Europe had to be intended as something that had as its core in the territories of the old empire.

Often used as an anti-Soviet concept, the function of which was to create an identity that would distinguish this part of Europe from Soviet-made "Eastern Europe," this image of Central Europe was rich of nostalgic overtones. Most agreed that Central Europe had vanished with the destruction of the European Jewry and the post-WWII formation of nation-states, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, with very small or non-existing ethnic minorities.

There was an element of Habsburg myth and nostalgia. The Habsburg myth and nostalgia was reflected, in the 1970s and 1980s, by a rediscovering of writers like Joseph Roth¹¹. It is quite paradoxical that a writer from Czechoslovakia living in France had a nostalgia for an empire whose final destruction was brought about also (according to the Franco-Hungarian historian François Fejtő) by the decision of the first Czech President Tomáš Masaryk and of the French Prime Minister George Clemenceau not to accept a separated peace with the young Habsburg emperor Karl I (Fejtő

⁹ The most important reference is Schöpflin, Wood 1989. For a critical evaluation of the idea of Central Europe (also in relation to the idea of "Balkans", see Todorova 1997

¹⁰ This evokes the never ending problem of the character of Russia: European, non European, Euro-Asiatic? See for example Strada, Neumann.

1988). However, the reference to the Habsburg myth had positive undertones in the discussion on Central Europe, but absolutely negative undertones as far as Yugoslavia is concerned. Perhaps an other contradiction: those one supporting the secession of Slovenia and Croatia had a positive view of the Habsburg myth, whereas the view from Belgrade preferred Yugoslav unity, but despised the unity of the old empire.

A good example for this polarity between Central Europe and the Balkans was the discussion between Milan Kundera and Peter Handtke on Slovenia, that regarded more the respective countries of the two writers: (at that time) Czechoslovakia and Austria than effectively Slovenia, and more generally the destiny of Central Europe. Kundera supported Slovenia's bid for independence, because he saw an analogy between Yugoslavia/Serbia and Soviet Union/Russia, and thought it was necessary for countries like Slovenia or Czechoslovakia to "return" to Europe and free themselves from non democratic – and, implicitly, only partially European – countries. On the contrary, Handtke, as an Austrian, feared the gravitational attraction of German power in the new post-1989 Europe. To state it a bit roughly: Kundera feared Russia, Handtke feared Germany. One could think that the idea of Central Europe has something in common with Mackinder's *Heartland*: its location shifts according to the representations and perceptions of the historical contingency.

However, in connection to the discussions on nationalism, it is important the fact that a number of leading writers of Central European countries did not think of liberation from the Soviet-Communist rule in terms of construction of a national myth, as it was the case of the Paper of the Serbian Academy of Sciences, but with the construction of an other myth, pointing at common cultural heritage with Western Europe and peaceful coexistence of cultural diversity. In this respect, there is a need of a comparative analysis of post-communist parties in Serbia and other countries, since many post-communist countries (above all in Poland and Hungary) openly opted for a new Europe-oriented, non nationalist political identity.

This discussion has been waning with the admission of Central European countries to the European Union, and even the problem of the Balkans-Central Europe difference is now overcome with the admission of Romania and Bulgaria.

¹¹ It has now degenerated into the use and abuse of the Habsburgs as a trade mark for tourism in Austria. The Italian culture historian and writer Caludio Magris was among the first who analysed the "Habsburg myth"¹¹ (Magris 1977, 1982).

4. Integration versus fragmentation

After the fall of communist regimes, whereas domestic policies was shaped by the necessity to secure a transition towards market economy and democracy, foreign policy was characterised by two different – and at a certain degree contradictory – discourses: the full recovery of national sovereignty and “return to Europe”. The two discourses are obviously not contradictory, but the radical version of the latter could not be fully consistent with the former.

Just after 1989 the “return to Europe” was felt more in terms of culture and civilisation rather than of compliance to the standards of an integrating community. This race to Europe was well understandable, but could have been destructive for the ongoing process of “deepening” of the integration of the Community. Thus, the Community turned into a Union took a series of decision concerning the politics of enlargement. There were mainly conditions concerning the economic and legal structure of the countries, but also the respect for human rights and the minorities. In the Council of Copenhagen were stated the conditions for the admission to the EU. As far as Central and Eastern European countries were concerned

Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities

European policies have had a double impact on nationalist politics in east-Central Europe. On one side, they helped the formation of coalitions that openly preferred the integration in Europe to nationalism. The other one is a change of language in the nationalist discourse, and more precisely the rephrasing of nationalist claims in terms of “minority rights”. This could throw some sinister shadow, given the same type of use of “minority rights” during the 1930s by the Nazi Germany. However, *si duo faciunt idem non est idem!* The EU framework for minority rights obliges nationalist parties and groups to grant – at least nominally – their domestic minorities the very same rights they ask for theirs abroad.

A good example is provided by the above quoted example of Hungary and Hungarian minority. In Hungary the main difference between the centre-left and the centre- right coalitions is probably given by the difference in the attitude towards nationalism. Whereas the Socialist Party rejects nationalist rhetoric and programmes, the Fidesz seems to be more inclined in this direction. This not only because of the rhetoric you find in the manifesto and in Viktor Orban (Fidesz’ leader)’s speeches. For example, in the manifesto the expression “Hungarian citizens and the Hungarian nation” is used throughout the document. It is more important the support Fidesz gave to

the referendum held in December 2004 regarding the bestowal of citizenship to the Hungarians outside Hungary. It is interesting the fact that the turnout to the referendum was extremely low (31%). This proves that the issues of nationalism do not get the interest of a majority of the Hungarian public opinion.

Really, Hungarian performances with respect to minority rights are not that good. It results from the paper of the Commission that the real opportunities for the Rom have not substantially increased in the last years. Equally, the admission of Romania did not imply a perfect solution to the problems of Hungarian minorities in Transylvania. However, all this conflicts have been set in an institutional framework and the ethno-national bomb has been made less devastating.

One could reasonably ask weather other ideas, such as the “return to Europe” were more appealing, or whether people sometime are more driven by interest than by passions (the opposite of what Freud thought was happening during wars). One could also think that sometimes there can be a “virtuous circle” of mutual constitution between interests and ideas.

Finally, the statement that nationalism is a paper tiger is perhaps a bit exaggerated, but we should learn not to overstate apocalyptic scenarios, that draw on past experiences. The paper deals with theories of ethno-nationalism as forecast of general war in post-1989 Europe, and tries to see how ethno-nationalist forces were constrained by European politics and policies. The conclusion is that ethno-nationalism is not yet a paper tiger, but it does not seem strong enough to bring about a war in Europe (may be with some exception?).

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