

Nationalism: Back with a Vengeance

By [Doug Bandow](#)

September 22, 2014

We are supposed to be living in the postmodern era, freed from the traditional petty concerns of national interest and, even worse, nationalism. A new era of peaceful globalism was supposed to have dawned. Then came Turkey's fusion of Islam and nationalism under its prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan; Sri Lankan leader Mahinda Rajapaksa's use of militant Buddhist nationalism to defeat the Tamil insurgency and construct an authoritarian state; China's increasingly assertive territorial demands in the South China Sea; the election and reelection of Hungary's conservative nationalist Viktor Orbán; Moscow's seizure of Crimea in the name of ethnic Russians; India's election of Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi; the Scottish independence movement; and more.

Far from being dead, nationalism is back with a vengeance.

The Persistence of Nationalism

Historical fashion varies over time. Early peoples organized themselves by gathering with those who looked alike and talked and acted similarly. But multiethnic empires also emerged as the strong dominated, even subjugated, the weak. Then, a century ago, the most important European multiethnic empires—Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian—collapsed. That process unexpectedly led to horrors beyond imagination, as the resulting *Saisonstaaten*, or “states for a season,” as some Germans called the new countries, were absorbed by their rapacious and more powerful neighbors.

A similar collapse began in 1989 as the Soviet Empire dissolved. Western commentators were quick to proclaim the triumph of liberal democracy; Francis Fukuyama famously suggested that we had reached the “end of history,” with liberal democracy representing the “end point of mankind's ideological evolution.” Of course, the move from totalitarian communism to democratic capitalism did not progress so smoothly. Although most in the West do not share Russian leader Vladimir Putin's view that the fall of Soviet communism was a geopolitical catastrophe, the process was painful, difficult, and messy for the peoples involved.

The communist collapse and its aftermath raised a fundamental question: how best are polities ordered? The overwhelming response—or at least the answer that politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, journalists, academics, and other elites pushed hardest—was that in a “postnational,” globalized world, internationalist and multinational systems were the answer.

Indeed, the United Nations was offered as *the* answer to humanity's problems. Never mind that the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, had failed to deliver on its promise to bring international peace and harmony in the wake of World War I. Never mind, too, the inherent limitations of any organization made up of self-seeking and often authoritarian governments.

European leaders responded to the breakup of the Eastern bloc by expanding an international organization of their own: the European Union (EU). An idea that had been discussed since the end of World War II, this political and economic union became a reality in 1993. It suppressed traditional national differences: it established an unelected executive for the entire union and gave a European Parliament control of the budget, but left the new entity without a military, the normal signature of a sovereign state. Soon enough the EU installed a unified currency, the euro, on the assumption that it would force additional monetary and fiscal cooperation, as well as further political consolidation.

Despite these victories for internationalists, concern for national sovereignty did not disappear. In fact, opposition to transnational organizations grew. Although American administrations routinely attempted to use the UN to their own advantage—winning Security Council approval for military operations and economic sanctions, for instance—Washington resolutely resisted unfavorable UN decisions. American administrations also refused to fund UN operations with which they disagreed. Even when successive administrations pressed for acceptance of UN initiatives, such as the Law of the Sea Treaty, Congress balked out of concern for national sovereignty.

Meanwhile, European peoples grew less accepting of the EU and its grand ambitions. In 2005 French and Dutch voters rejected the proposed European constitution. In response, the Eurocratic elite reissued the constitution as a treaty, which did not require popular approval.

Only Ireland put the document to a vote. The Irish voted no, to the outrage of Eurocrats across the continent. They debated whether to sideline Dublin as a second-class EU member or make the Irish vote again until they got it right. The EU leadership chose the second course, and Ireland then ratified the treaty.

Although the Eurocrats triumphed with that strong-arm measure, they have not been able to stamp out opposing views. On the contrary, the economic crisis that erupted in 2008 has only strengthened popular dissent and nationalist sentiment. When several countries turned to the EU for bailouts, Europhiles pressed for even more centralized fiscal and political power: giving Brussels control over national budgets and continental borrowing through Eurobonds. Nations requiring bailouts were forced to accept humiliating and painful economic reforms, essentially transferring control of economic policy to a European “troika.”

In Greece, one of the countries bailed out, the anti-EU Left achieved substantial electoral gains, becoming the main political opposition, while the Golden Dawn gave a hard right-wing edge to antigovernment protests. In France, Marine Le Pen moved the nationalist-populist National Front to the center of the country's politics. Similar currents reached even the stolidly bourgeois Germans, with the government resisting proposals to turn the country's debt rating over to its profligate neighbors, the constitutional court limiting power transfers to Brussels, and the

Alternative for Germany party rising to challenge the EU. Euroskeptics won increasing representation in other national bodies and the European Parliament.

Secessionist sentiments have threatened to transform Europe's structure. Belgium became so bitterly divided that it went without an elected government for 589 days in 2010 and 2011, and the largest party in Flanders favors splitting the country. In Spain, the province of Catalonia announced a referendum on self-determination, while Scotland scheduled a referendum on whether to separate from the United Kingdom, once the world's globe-spanning empire. These and other secessionist movements expand nationalistic feelings by promoting new, smaller, and more unified sovereign states.

Nationalism took a more aggressive form when Russia engineered the breakaway of Crimea from Ukraine. The collapse of the Soviet Union left substantial numbers of ethnic Russians scattered throughout the newly independent nations. At the time, Moscow was too weak to defend its own geopolitical interests, let alone assert itself on behalf of ethnic Russians outside its borders. But Vladimir Putin restored both state authority and military capability. Although he probably is as interested in power politics and geopolitical interests as in ethnic solidarity, nationalism offered him a means to advance Russia internationally while strengthening himself politically.

Prudence

These varied and controversial moves toward greater ethnic unity may be natural reactions to the almost fevered demand by elites in distant capitals for greater diversity of subject peoples combined with increased authority for central governments. Ethnic or cultural unity does make it easier to form a cohesive polity; by itself, however, nationality offers no independent grounds for sovereignty. The presence in a given territory of a majority with a particular immutable characteristic offers no principled justification for joining other territories with similar national majorities. Shared ethnicity cannot supplant consent—in a fair vote, many Crimeans might have decided that they preferred to relate to Moscow from afar rather than underfoot, for instance.

Consent is particularly important where territories contain substantial national, ethnic, and other minorities. In practice, national and ethnic homogeneity becomes less likely the wider the boundaries are drawn. As such, nationality almost always fails as a basis for sovereignty. Attempting to create ethnic-based nations after World War I merely shifted conflict downward. For instance, at the Paris Peace Conference Woodrow Wilson was surprised to learn that three million Germans lived in Bohemia, which he supported transferring to the new nation of Czechoslovakia. These Germans had as much justification in seeking inclusion in Germany as the Czechs had had in separating from Austria-Hungary.

It would be better to rely on prudence to order societies. The more diverse the population, the better the case for a looser federal arrangement with weaker central power. Such arrangements seem the best means of resolving some of today's more intractable territorial disputes. There is no obvious reason to link Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia together, as Belgium currently does, especially given the continental market the EU has created. Of course, saying that separation would be legitimate is not the same as saying that it would be the most

practical or prudent course. Maintaining a single nation, with a looser federation, could lessen tensions between Flanders and Wallonia by reducing transfers from and controls over the other.

Sometimes differences are cultural and economic rather than ethnic. For example, Thailand has been forced to the breaking point as the urban elite, an establishment representing the court, business, bureaucracy, military, and wealthier classes, has refused to accept election victories by parties representing the rural poor. In May the military staged yet another coup to remove from power a government reflecting the fifth straight populist victory. Federalism, by expanding local autonomy and reducing central control, might allow the contending factions to coexist without constant political and even violent conflict.

The dramatic return of nationalist sentiment may horrify elites who seek to empower supranational organizations, but the fact is that such nationalism is a common popular impulse that cannot be ignored without great peril. Perhaps the greatest danger is to persist in pushing forms of transnational governance that have failed so many times before and sparked bitter opposition, nationalist fervor, partisan conflict, and even war.

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