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How to Transition to Sustainable Democracies?

Why European Leaders Should Craft Inclusive Nationalisms

by Maya Tudor

AA titanic battle is under way between the peddlers of exclusionary nationalism and the defenders of individual liberal rights. Globally, populist leaders have swept to power in every corner of the globe over the past decade, winning elections by targeting so-called 'corrupt' elites in the name of a supposedly 'pure' people. Once in power, such populist leaders, from Erdoğan to Modi, Orbán to Trump, have sought to undo democracy by means of an increasingly familiar playbook: defanging legislatures, packing courts and undermining academia and the media as agents of independent thinking and finally moving directly to target political opponents.

Besides instigating successive stages of democratic erosion in the name of the national community, populist leaders have also undermined social cohesion by drawing battle lines *within* the national community, between groups of citizens portrayed as central to the nation – the supposed 'we the people' – and groups of citizens who are regarded as other. One way of developing democratic resilience is therefore to fashion an alternative, inclusive nationalism. After all, nationalism is a powerful force that legitimates the use of state power.

It is worth remembering that just three decades ago deep ideological conflict over the very desirability of democracy seemed unthinkable. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama argued that 'history', in the sense of successive Hegelian ideological battles over the best social and economic ways for societies to organise themselves, had come to an end because the commitment to individual liberty that had come to define democracy and capitalist organisation of the economy had definitively won.[1] Political developments during the 1990s appeared to prove Fukuyama correct: the Soviet Union disintegrated, legitimating capitalism; India turned away from substantial government-led

1 Fukuyama, Francis (1992) 'The End of History and the Last Man'.

market intervention and engaged in liberalising reforms; and China, the only other major global economy presenting both a capitalist and a democratic alternative, announced major ambitions to become a market economy. History indeed *seemed* to have ended.

Today's global democratic outlook represents a marked correction to Fukuyama's optimism. The Soviet Union's disintegration did not create a democratic Russia but gave rise to a similarly autocratic regime that has started multiple wars. Putin's aggression is driven by a particular understanding of the Russian nation and its historical contours. He claims that the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century – a period in which catastrophes were not in short supply – was the breakup of the Soviet Union. What is more, the fantastic growth of the Chinese economy has not resulted in a more democratic China, but in a Chinese government more committed than ever to exerting political control over its economy. India, once a beacon of hope for the idea that democracy could flourish in the inhospitable soil of diversity and poverty, has elected a nationalist populist leader who initiated the country's democratic backsliding over the past decade.

More surprisingly, democracy as a global value is now under threat even from the well-established democracies that once championed it. The United States, the hegemon that singlehandedly constitutes one quarter of the world economy and has historically championed global democratic aspirations, is withdrawing support from democracy-promoting initiatives beyond its shores. Moreover, the United States itself is experiencing a marked assault on domestic civil liberties.

It is hard to imagine a realistic scenario more threatening to democracy than the current state of affairs, a global realignment away from democracy on the part of every major power beyond Europe, while a war rages ominously close to the European Union's borders. This is happening just a couple of months into Trump's four-year presidency. European leaders must now attempt to don the mantle of responsibility as the only region of the world broadly committed to democratic forms of government while ramping up military spending and almost certainly cutting welfare spending. How can European leaders committed to democratic government respond?

Addressing a problem first requires diagnosis. While international attention to democracy is keenest during national elections, it bears repeating that democracy is not suffering globally because elections are declining. Indeed, more countries are holding elections than at any time in global history. Democracy is instead dying through the slow strangulation of individual civil liberties, especially the rights of individual citizens to legal protection when they dissent against their governments. The erosion of media and academic independence are also important.[2]

A particularly common cause of the decline in civil liberties is the invocation by populist leaders of historical, often religious and racial, definitions of the nation to legitimate the marginalisation of groups outside the core national identity. In Poland for example, the Law and Justice party came to power and initiated democratic backsliding by weaponising religious conceptions of the Polish people.[3] In the United States, Donald Trump came to power by, activating white Christian national narratives of Americanness.[4] And in India, Narendra Modi has mobilised one of the world's most active social movements to come to power and redefine Indianness in terms of Hinduism.[5] In all three of these cases, the rise of populist leaders has led to marked declines in the civil liberties of ideationally marginal citizens.

Crucial to the battle to reinforce democratic resilience therefore is finding ways to protect the rights of individuals to dissent when populist governments are willing to undermine the rights of religious or racial minorities in the name of exclusionary nationalism. Instead of reconceptualising or pluralising nationalism, however, European leaders' response to

2 Bermeo, N. (2016) On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*.

3 Zubrzycki, G. (2006) *The crosses of Auschwitz: nationalism and religion in post-communist Poland.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://journals.akademicka.pl/politeja/article/view/6247/.

4 Gorski, P. S. and Perry, S. L. (2022) *The flag and the cross: white Christian nationalism and the threat to American democracy.* Oxford University Press.

5 Tudor, M. (2018) India's nationalism in historical perspective: The democratic dangers of ascendant nativism. *India Politics and Policy*, 1(1).

rising nationalism over the past decade has often been to reject nationalism altogether. For example, French President Macron calls for the forces of nationalism to be defeated, by which he means right-wing nationalists.

But what alternative orienting identities and value systems are European leaders offering up? Among the key lessons to be learned about the direction of European politics over the past decade is the idea that identities and inequalities matter as much as the material distribution of benefits. European leaders should be doing more than simply rejecting exclusionary nationalism. This simply abandons nationalism as a resource to those political peddlers willing to exploit it. Instead, they should offer up a definition of the nation that recognises the growing plurality of identities and makes these increasingly mixed identities consistent with belonging to a European nation. Actively shaping European values and national identities in this way deprives would-be autocrats of the ideational legitimation for their divisive 'us versus them' politics that enables extremist and primarily right-wing nationalists to rise to power.

In a recent book with co-author Harris Mylonas, we argued that all nationalisms vary in terms of ascriptiveness; in other words, in the degree to which a national identity is fixed by virtue of given social characteristics.[6] While scholars historically have understood nationalism in terms of 'civic' or 'ethnic' nationalism, more recent research has developed the idea that all nationalisms blend ideological or creedal dimensions of belonging with fixed identities.[7] National narratives can and should change over time because the meaning of a nation is under constant negotiation.

Although nationalism is used during wartime to rally the national community, the need for social cohesion does not disappear during peacetime. There is growing evidence that a strong popular attachment to the nation enables the state to gain the citizens' trust and compliance. A stronger sense of belonging to a national community generally boosts people's willingness to contribute to it. Appeals to protect the national community, for example, were found to increase mask wearing during the Covid-19 pandemic, even among people hostile to masks.[8] Appeals to a shared national community has also been shown to boost individual willingness to pay taxes and to vote in elections, propensities that are in short supply today.[9]

Getting citizens to identify with their nation is important for building precisely the kind of social cohesion that has been eroding in European nation-states. But this is a particular challenge for European nations built, at least partly, on religiously and racially homogenous narratives but that have been diversifying through immigration and demographic changes, such as inter-racial marriages. In this changing social context, European leaders need to be savvier about crafting compelling but inclusive nationalisms that effectively lay the basis for belonging to shared and meaningful communities of fate. In practice, this entails state efforts to pluralise the racially and religiously homogenous foundations of historically legitimated European nations so that immigrants can imagine themselves becoming full (not permanently second-class) members.

The challenge of creating cohesive and compelling national narratives amid diversifying European demographics is underscored by a study that found that Chinese immigrants to countries such as Canada, which deliberately disassociated ethnic identity from national identity by making 'the civic discourse of being Canadian supportive of hyphenated identity positions', found it easier to acquire a sense of being Canadian than in countries such as the Netherlands, where national belonging was understood intersubjectively to be defined in ethnic terms.[10] Another study found that refugees' perceptions of the national community's attributes powerfully shaped their receptiveness to state integration efforts.[11] Working to understand and actively fashion inclusive European nationalisms would strip the politicians who promise

6 Mylonas, H. and Tudor, M. (2023) *Varieties of Nationalism.* Cambridge.

7 Tamir, Y. (2019) Not so civic: Is there a difference between ethnic and civic nationalism? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22 (1): 419–434.

8 Kaplan, J. T., Vaccaro, A., Henning, M. et al. (2023) Moral reframing of messages about mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sci Rep* 13, 10140.

9 Hur, A. (2022) *Narratives of Civic Duty*. Cambridge.

racial or religious groups privileged access to power of historical ideational legitimation.

The dual possibilities of nationalism as a force for both undermining and stabilising democracy are playing out on European borders today. Putin sought to legitimise his invasion of Ukraine through a conception of Russian national identity that harks back to imagined ethnic pasts: 'Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole […] modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. We know and remember well that it was shaped – for a significant part – on the lands of historical Russia.'[12] But if Putin's concept of a Russian nation motivated the war, it is a pluralist Ukrainian nationalism that has spurred on the defence of the country's democracy.[13] It is for this reason that Ukrainian nationalism has been widely embraced throughout Europe and the United States: cultural symbols such as the Eiffel Tower, the Brandenburg Gate, the London Eye and the Empire State Building have been lit up with the Ukrainian flag. Similar transformations of national identity can and should happen within other European countries. From school curricula through statues and museums to everyday popular cultural symbols such as television shows, European countries should be actively shaping national definitions of 'we the people' in order to bind citizens together and protect shared democratic values.

10 Bélanger, E. and Verkuyten, M. (2010) Hyphenated Identities and Acculturation: Second-Generation Chinese of Canada and The Netherlands. *Identity*, 10(3): 141–163. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2010.495906

11 Hur, A. (2022) Migrant integration and the psychology of national belonging. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(13), 3245–3266. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2132381

12 Putin, V. (2021). On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians. Available at; http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

13 Onuch, O. and H. Hale (2022). *The Zelensky Effect.* Hurst.

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About the Brussels Democracy Papers

In response to the rise of leaders with autocratic tendencies in advanced democracies, creeping autocratisation in many democracies previously considered consolidated, and faltering democratisation processes in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung EU Office Brussels and FES Democracy of the Future Office Vienna organised the first Brussels Democracy Dialogue on 20 November 2024. Just like the previous Hambach Democracy Dialogue (HDD), this expert conference is a platform to exchange progressive ideas and proposals for further developing European democracies.