

Does Europe Really Interfere with National Identity?

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The idea of this presentation came from the discussions pointing out and criticizing the weaknesses of the EU that seem to be quite common in Lithuania nowadays. People say that “we took down one union, we will take down another as well.” Such statements might be noisy, but they’re also irresponsible. Everyone and anyone is criticizing the EU. The faults in how the EU functions (lack of democracy, increasing centralization as well as a messy identity and lack of ideas about the future) are very well perceived. Often the EU is criticized in Lithuania without even putting the effort to understand its functional details and apparatus. Rarely (or hardly ever at all) anyone comes up with ideas how the European Union could function best, even if such vehement critics generally tend to acknowledge that the EU is necessary for Lithuania.

Different Concepts of Nationality

In terms of cultural national identity, in Lithuania we are still under a strong influence of the exclusive and competitive nationality (as discussed by Algirdas Julius Greimas) which was very firmly shaped during the Soviet time: the Song Festivals, rustic amateur arts, pseudo-national cultural attributes created and supported by the local nomenclature (like the Šėduva windmill, or the mass produced paintings or household items decorated with ethnic patterns).

Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas said the following about the production of *Mindaugas* by Justinas Marcinkevičius: “in terms of emotional energy, while sentimental, and in terms of emphasizing the ethnic uniqueness in a rather aggressive way, it is more characteristic of the Eastern and Central European space dominated by the Soviets than of Lithuania of early 13th century and hardly at all conceivable in the Western world” (Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, “Justino Marcinkevičiaus “Mindaugas”, in: *Kūrybos studijos ir interpretacijos*, p. 195).

Aggressively manifest and emotionally colored cultural nationalism in the context of the Soviet empire aspired to emphasize cultural uniqueness. Aggressiveness and sentimental emotionality was also probably a certain contrast to bland friendly internationalism.

The “essentialist” concept of nationality is still quite widespread in Lithuania. It means that there must be some pure nuclei of national identity which form the foundation of the nation. This “purity” is quite peculiar. The Lithuanians are perceived to be not a “nation of blood”, but a “nation of language”. The Lithuanian language has become analogous with nationality. During the Soviet time, the main struggle was against the patina of “foreign items” on it. In independent Lithuania, the Lithuanian language is not perceived to be a living and developing means of communication in the society either. It is perceived to be carefully protected and maintained by specialists in order to preserve its purity and correctness.

Some public opinions (e. g. Zigmąs Zinkevičius’) about the identity of the residents of the Vilnius region also indicate quite a strong presence of “blood nationalism” as well. According to Zigmąs Zinkevičius, the Vilnius region residents have “forgotten” that they are Lithuanian and must eventually remember that. An interesting point is the fact that the linguistic argument is also employed in this case – the conclusion that they are Lithuanian is based on the analysis of family names.

In his discussion of ethnocultural nationalism, Anthony D. Smith (*Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*) contrasted it with the above concept of nationalism. He viewed nationality as dynamic, changing in the course of history, but he also resisted the idea that nationality may be created “out of thin air”. Nations may have several narratives about national ancestors or golden ages of national thriving. The things that he understood to “glue” a nation together were a certain emotional attachment

to certain places of memory, rituals and narratives that are based on historic events that are important to the national community. Such a nation must not be monolithic. The best examples of the Lithuanian ethnocultural identity are the inclusion of the post-war guerilla resistance narrative, and especially the discovery of The Grand Duchy of Lithuania period as significant to the national narrative.

A nation may also be viewed the way so-called “modernists” do, as a community shaped by the intellectual elite in modern times, by engaging the press to unite everyone, reacting to historic changes, and so on (E. Gellner, B. Anderson). By the way, if we consider the 19th century activities of the creators of the Lithuanian nation, we will discover a number of characteristics that the modernists talk about: publication of the press, a nation emerging out of a small intellectual movement, a conscious choice to be Lithuanian and to learn the Lithuanian language, organizing Lithuanian nights – at least two future presidents and their families and a large number future members of the Government were involved in such activities.

All the possible variations of understanding national identities are contained in the spectrum from imagining the national identity (and even more, the national strength) as prevailing as long as certain national attributes (which are imagined to have reached us from distant past) will be protected pure and untouchable, to the constructivist approach wherein the national identity may be modified and changed in search of the best ways to consolidate the community.

All three concepts of the national identity presume a very different relationship with other identities, national or transnational. The essentialist concept rejects any other identities as harmful to the purity of the national (Lithuanian) identity. The ethnocultural concept perceives multidirectional influences of various nationalities as unavoidable and enriching the national identities. The modernist attitude views the possible changes in the national cultural identity even more simplistically.

European Cultural Identity is Weak

A much more difficult question is the matter of the European cultural identity. How should we imagine Europe and its common cultural identity? Should we imagine the European *demos* (since it is difficult to talk about a European *ethnos*) analogous to a national identity? The favorite

and probably the main argument of a Europe critic Alvydas Jokubaitis is precisely based on his premise that the European *demos* should function almost like a national *ethnos* as understood by the essentialist concept. As he fails to find that in reality, he uses that as proof of Europe's weakness and maybe even groundlessness.

Besides, precisely this essentialist concept of the European cultural identity is unavoidably more or less at odds with all three of the above concepts of national identity. Unless we seriously believe that the national identity, like any other common identity, may be constructed by political, economic or managerial elites. But no one is in fact seriously speaking about an essentialist European cultural identity.

Generally, the European cultural identity is perceived in one of two ways. The first is related to the European cultural history, its Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritage. The second, with the efforts to come up with a common narrative that could unite Europe, that could be common and acceptable identity narrative to all Europeans. Bearing in mind the European history of constant war and multidirectional centuries-long splits (with occasional unification), this idea is more an ambition rather than a possibility. The most prominent initiative was the 2014 effort of the European Commission to create a narrative about Europe rooted in the Renaissance idea of Europe (it was called "A New Narrative for Europe"): the Europe in which technological advancement, new ideas, geniuses and arts thrived. Meetings and discussions of intellectuals regarding this new identity were planned. However, by now it is apparent that the idea is not developing at all. Maybe a more productive way would be to ground the cultural identity of Europe in the Medieval Europe, when at least in terms of culture, it was at all possible to see a Europe rooted in Christianity, in this sense, even a nation of Europe and at least partly, an empire that consolidated it politically. But construction projects are not taking this path.

The first way is more philosophical. It is fun for the intellectuals and too complicated to be attractive and accessible to the masses. Remi Brague (*Excentric Culture*) mentions specific cultural traits associated with "Europeanness". It is a certain perception of the inferiority of the European culture that leads to openness towards other civilizations and cultural innovations, an interest in something that is interesting from the human and civilization perspective (and not in what is "own"), respect to cultural objects and things.

As we see, the European cultural identity that could unite Europe as a community is very weak. It has hardly any consolidatory effect at all. Neil Flighstein (*Euro-Clash*) studied which forms of mass culture could be considered common to Europeans. He discovered that there are no television or radio stations that were “transnational”, the phenomena of cultural globalization are more prevalent than the phenomena of Europeanization, and the national identity runs deep. The Europeans mostly read the national press and watch the national channels. He also discovered that among the movies that Europeans watch the majority are American. Europeans mostly read translated novels, and the European / non-European distinction makes little difference here, even if *Harry Potter* seems to dial the novel-reading statistics up towards Europeanness rather than globalization (or Westernization). Therefore it is possible to conclude that any distinct “common European” culture does not exist, and in a very paradoxical way, Brague may be right.

Christianity is doubtlessly the only cultural and civilizational item that is truly a common attribute of the Europeans historically and nowadays. The unwillingness to declare Christianity as a clear cultural grounds of Europe indicates that the weapons seem to be laid down on this front. The only prominent and clear ideas of European identity are associated with the political project of Europe as the European Union. Numerous researchers and thinkers have observed that it would be very difficult to associate the European identity with a cultural idea, and simply identify “Europe” with the political project of the “European Union”.

But however misty the cultural idea of Europe seems to be, and however it crumbles as soon as we try to fit it to a particular definition and connect to the whole “real” Europe. What has been said so far also indicates that if anyone is in fact “threatening” the national identity and its certain conceptions, it is not the Europeanness, but globalization. Lithuania entered Europe and the world at the same time, and it is difficult to see the distinction between these two entities. Or maybe there is not much willingness to see it, placing all the blame for the identity-related insecurities at the feet of whoever is closest and most tangible – Europe and the European Union. Any suggestions to “bring down the world order” or “exit the world” would not at all sound serious, whereas choosing the European Union as the object, the project seems much more rational. Europe itself is strongly

affected by globalization, and its main cultural pillars are the cultures of the various nations of Europe.

European and National Identity: Between Euronationalism and Euroimperialism

The relationship between European and national identity is described in numerous ways. In the sociological surveys of Eurostat the European identity of a particular individual is defined in a very weak connection: the posited question is whether the person “identifies” with being European. Besides, the follow up questions ask whether the person feels only European, only part of a certain nation (Lithuanian), or if he or she sees himself or herself as both Lithuanian and European. The Lithuanians, who are among the greatest Euro-optimists (both Lithuanian and European), are also quite prominent nationalists based on the number of people who say they are only Lithuanian. Precisely that weak link to the European identity, the lack of precision in what “European identity” is, is doubtlessly the guarantee of the Euro-optimism. The surveys indicate that the “European” identity is a certain refuge to the ethnic minorities in nation states where the political system is closely related to the prevalence of the ethnic majority, as is the case in Lithuania.

Such surveys are grounded in one model of the relationship between the national and the European identity, which is called the “matrioshka”. It means that the nucleus of an individual identity consists of the national identity, and the European identity is supposedly a different layer, less important, complimentary to the national identity. It does not threaten to replace or change the national identity, but rather, as if envelopes it.

A much more interesting, even though more difficult to analyze, is another model of the national and European identity, called the “marble cake”. It means that the national self-perception of the nations that live in Europe and identify with it in a very subtle way influences their national identity, and the European identity is equally affected by the national identities. The European standard for car signs, the signs announcing European Union funding next to new buildings or refurbished squares are the signs of this effect and also this identity. However, in this sense it is also a very weak European identity. Its effect is only observable long-term, therefore it should not be cause for great concern as a threat to the national identity.

There is yet another model of the relationship between national and European identity that has come to prominence lately (Ivan Krastev, some others) and that especially affects the expectations of the youngest members of the European Union. It is a phenomenon that may be called “Euronationalism”. I use this term to describe the phenomenon when EU is modeled on the model of national political life of a particular country, defined. Euronationalism may explain why in Lithuania, the problem of the relationship between European and national identity has become so pertinent, where its roots lie.

The European Union has crossed the boundary from simply an economic union to a political one, founded by the states that had a rich experience of national statehood, a government apparatus that had withstood the test of centuries, but they were also former empire states. The present structure of the EU political government and administration is shaped according to their (primarily German and French) experience of national statehood. Doubtlessly, Jürgen Habermas, one of the most influential idea generators of the common Europe, found his idea of a “European citizen” as more important than a citizen of a nation state, as well as the ideas for the European Constitution, in the experience of uniting the German federation and other historic experiences. The French philosophers, who have spoken up about the lack of democracy in the European Union as an entity (Pierre Manent, *Democracy Without Nations*), the imbalance between the influence and the accountability of its administration, are looking into their own experience of the state and the concept of democracy. These struggles and criticisms towards the European Union must first of all be understood as the efforts of the representatives of states that have functional political systems to make the European political or even cultural model as similar as possible to their own political and cultural model and their understanding of what is important for a political community.

The former imperial states laid the foundation for what is now the European Union, and it has quite a few attributes of an empire. Jan Zielonka (*Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*), one of my favorite authors, has even called the EU entity “neomedieval empire”. This idea is primarily based in the model of EU expansion. The EU satellite states had to meet certain prerequisite criteria, and only meeting them allowed them to enter the fellowship. As we have experienced, Lithuania had

to put some very serious efforts to meet the pre-defined guidelines. The motivation to do that was strengthened by a certain conviction that the rules are “good” and by the effort to escape the Russian zone of influence. The relationship between the “nucleus” and the margin states of the European Union truly has been and still remains “imperial”, even if it is not imperialist. And that may also be explained by their real and tested long-term experience and not by some prejudiced meanness. The EU model that we have is based less on certain universal principles that Immanuel Kant described in “Perpetual Peace” and that have often been evoked as a source of a certain inspiration (even if self-delusional).

The EU model is based on the political experience of its first founding member-states, just like their political consensus. EU has expanded to include the countries that Nyka-Niliūnas described as aggressively nationalist. As we have also seen in the case of Lithuania, a certain cultural nationalism was maintained throughout the Soviet time. Without the possibility to create their own state, the sole object of the efforts of the elite was cultural nationalism. It was grounded in closing ranks, protecting the nationality and aspiring to exclusivity.

The brief history of statehood meant that political ideas and dreams, political ambitions that surpassed the collected experience of the communities were more prevalent. As Vladimir Tismaneanu (*Fantasies of Salvation*) wrote, after the regime fell, the states got involved in the quest for new myths of nationalism in an attempt to consolidate the communities in this way. Accepting strict EU rules could hardly meet the expectations, and it was very much at odds with the previous political experience. The imperial EU model might have seemed and, apparently, does seem at least in Poland and Hungary as one that does not include the political experience and meets the unique nationalist expectations even less. “Euronationalism” is exactly the aspiration that the EU model and functioning would meet the expectations and experience of a particular state as closely as possible. Lithuania, based on *Imperijos darymas (The Making of an Empire)* by Gintaras Beresnevičius and *Nepasiskelbusioji imperija (The Undeclared Empire)* by Zenonas Norkus, also has its own empire-like ambitions, also in Europe.

The present contrast between European and national identity, perceivable in some echoes in Lithuania as well, is not a matter of the possibility of having national attributes and symbols: it is a matter of the possibility

to reform the previous imperial model of the EU. It is hard to say how it will end. Maybe the impotent EU Parliament will be supplemented with a much more potent EU House of Nations or something like that. Maybe necessary requirements for the EU countries will change. Such possibilities are also forecast in the five scenarios of EU development currently under consideration.

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To sum up and to answer the question to what extent Europe interferes with the national identity, we have reached two conclusions. First, the cultural identity of Europe as a certain “national” community is very weak, and the attempts to strengthen it by constructing a certain common narrative have not produced a result. The European cultural identity may only be grounded in national identities. What really affects the culture, including cultural nationality, is not so much the European identity as globalization.

The idea about the conflict between the national and European identity that has been strongly expressed recently is more connected to “Euro-nationalism” and the efforts of the new EU members to change the EU model to better meet their expectations. Therefore it is connected less to the present EU identity and more to the new expectations regarding the EU identity and its model. Will the EU empire survive? It will depend on whether the countries of Western Europe have learned their lessons from the fall of the empires, and whether they will be able to apply this experience to solve this European challenge. It will equally depend on whether the Central European countries will be able to learn from their experience of aggressive nationalism and whether they will be able to tone it down for the sake of Europe’s common future.

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